

NEW WORLDS

— PROFILES —

Robert A. Heinlein

Colorado, U.S.A



Along with author Heinlein we also introduce "Pete" the hero of Bob's latest book *Door into Summer*. Space, however, is insufficient to cover all the biographical details which have accrued during the author's 18 years of writing—over two million words of fiction and articles; 21 published books, which, including translated editions, now exceed a million and a half sales; innumerable short stories upon which his reputation as an outstanding writer and thinker has made him pre-eminent in the s-f field.

For the past eight years he has concentrated mainly on writing book-length novels and travelling extensively round the world. His novelette in this issue is one of those rare excursions into the short story medium that we would like to see more regularly.

Born in Butler, Missouri, in 1907, he eventually majored in naval science at the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis and later served as a line officer with the U.S. Fleet until 1934 when he was retired for a physical disability. It was this enforced retirement which ultimately led him to start writing, during which time he has used nine pen names. He is an extremely interesting conversationalist and correspondent, with a wide range of interests which include chess, mathematics, astronomy, figure skating, cats, semantics, astronautics and architecture.

He lives with his wife Ginny in Colorado Springs in a futuristic-type house they designed and built a few years ago. He hopes to live long enough to go to the Moon and is quite confident that we shall have space travel long before the close of the century.

NEW WORLDS

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★ A NEW ROBERT A. HEINLEIN STORY ★

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CONTENTS

<i>Short Stories :</i>	
The Menace From Earth	Robert A. Heinlein 4
A Sudden Darkness	D. M. Parks 30
Sense Of Wonder	Bertram Chandler 42
Mate In One	Lan Wright 54
 <i>Serial :</i>	
The Uninhibited Conclusion	Dan Morgan 82
 <i>Article :</i>	
The Solar Atmosphere	Kenneth Johns 49
 <i>Features :</i>	
Editorial	John Carnell 2
The Literary Line-up	 29

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The Little "Bigcon"

Time dims memories, but I feel that it will be a long while before this year's 15th World Science Fiction Convention will fade from the memories of those 250 delegates who attended or the ink fades from the record books. As delegates departed from the King's Court Hotel and a measure of peace and sanity returned to the overworked staff, the consensus of opinion was "It was a *wonderful* Convention!" Visiting Americans, including Guest of Honour John W. Campbell, Jr., and his wife, were unanimous in declaring that for efficiency and friendliness, humour and seriousness, excellent programming with all the right things happening at the right time, London had put on the finest Convention yet held.

This was the "Little Big One"—'little' only because there were never more than 200 delegates at any one session, but 'big' in everything else. And this after an opposition delegate in New York last year has said that in his opinion London was not ready for a World Convention! It is a fine tribute to the entire London Committee that so many overseas delegates voiced their enthusiasm during and after the Convention itself.

Events started happening before the conference opened, so efficiently had the Public Relations been handled. As Guest of Honour Campbell alighted from the plane at London Airport he was met by a B.B.C. radio interviewer and within minutes was making a recorded talk in the airport studio, which subsequently went out on "Radio Newsreel" that evening. Two hours later he was being interviewed and photographed by press representatives and within another hour was the centre of a press conference at which many British and American authors were in attendance. So great (apparently) was the advance interest, that at one time there were more press, radio and television people in the hotel than there were delegates, although most of their copy was "killed" at the editorial desk.

The second day's highlights were the luncheon banquet midday and the Costume Ball in the evening. At the former a dazzling display of brilliant speakers kept the diners entertained—Arthur C. Clarke, last year's Guest of Honour in New York, who introduced John W. Campbell, Jr., both speaking seriously and humorously about science fiction; Robert A. Madle from Washington, the American delegate who had an expenses-paid trip as representative of America's amateur fandom; British author John Brunner; Forrest J. Ackerman from Hollywood; Rainer Eisfeld, a young student from Germany, whose brilliant speech brought thunderous

applause ; Lars Hellander from Sweden ; Sam Moskowitz from New York ; and finally British fan Pete Daniels from Lancashire.

Prior to the Costume Ball the B.B.C. Television programme "Tonight" had made arrangements to make filmed interviews with various authors and several delegates in futuristic costumes. Just before the technicians and interviewer arrived, however, Independent Television News called in to make an on-the-spot film recording of interviews for their news-reel. Some confusion arose at this juncture and the B.B.C. schedule was put out of timing—so much so that they eventually left the hotel at 6.00 a.m. on the Sunday morning. Meanwhile, the programme continued more or less according to plan—the costume parade and judging followed by the dance.

During television's temporary take-over the B.B.C. radio interviewers had also been busy and made recordings by John Wyndham and John Christopher. These were later linked with Mr. Campbell's talk and beamed to North America.

Although the general tone of this year's Convention was "informality" there were quite a number of serious items listed on the programme. An extremely interesting talk about London's new Planetarium which will be opened in December was given by Mr. R. Edds, Public Relations Officer of Madame Tussauds Ltd.; a fascinating display of hypnotism was given by Harry Powers; John W. Campbell, Jr., spoke at some length on the intensely interesting subject of "Psionics"; and Sam Moskowitz gave the result of an independent Survey of the American science fiction market, the statistics showing some surprising results as to who buys and reads science fiction.

Another outstanding event was the presentation of the Achievement Award trophies by the Convention President, John Wyndham. *New Worlds* won the award for the Best Professional British magazine; *Astounding Science Fiction* was voted the Best Professional American magazine; and in the amateur category *Science Fiction Times*, the American fortnightly news magazine. The spaceship trophies awarded to these magazines were accepted by myself, John W. Campbell, Jr., and American author John Victor Petersen respectively.

The film chosen for the Convention—"Mr. Wonderbird"—was shown to a packed audience and received a great ovation, it proving to be a very fine fantasy indeed.

Eric Frank Russell's comment to myself after the four-day session ended, seems to adequately sum up the Convention as a whole—"What struck me as distinctly outstanding is the way in which it went over with a lovely air of casualness and informality." A remark endorsed by every one who attended.

John Carnell

It has been many years since author Robert A. Heinlein produced a major short story in the science fiction field—and for just as many years we have been waiting for it to be written. Published only a few months ago in USA in Tony Boucher's Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction it appears here for the first time in Great Britain. And we hope that you will appreciate the satirical title !

THE MENACE FROM EARTH

By Robert A. Heinlein

My name is Holly Jones and I'm fifteen. I'm very intelligent but it doesn't show, because I look like an underdone angel. Insipid.

I was born right here in Luna City, which seems to surprise Earthside types. Actually, I'm third generation; my grandparents pioneered in Site One, where the Memorial is. I live with my parents in Artemis Apartments, the new co-op in Pressure Five, eight hundred feet down near City Hall. But I'm not there much; I'm too busy.

Mornings I attend Tech High and afternoons I study or go flying with Jeff Hardesty—he's my partner—or whenever a

tourist ship is in I guide groundhogs. This day the *Gripsholm* grounded at noon so I went straight from school to American Express.

The first gaggle of tourists was trickling in from Quarantine but I didn't push forward as Mr. Dorcas, the manager, knows I'm the best. Guiding is just temporary (I'm really a space-ship designer), but if you're doing a job you ought to do it well.

Mr. Dorcas spotted me. "Holly! Here, please. Miss Brentwood, Holly Jones will be your guide."

"'Holly,'" she repeated. "What a quaint name. Are you really a guide, dear?"

I'm tolerant of groundhogs—some of my best friends are from Earth. As Daddy says, being born on Luna is luck, not judgment, and most people Earthside are stuck there. After all, Jesus and Gautama Buddha and Dr. Einstein were all groundhogs.

But they can be irritating. If high school kids weren't guides, whom could they hire? "My license says so," I said briskly and looked her over the way she was looking me over.

Her face was sort of familiar and I thought perhaps I had seen her picture in those society things you see in Earthside magazines—one of the rich playgirls we get too many of. She was almost loathsomely lovely . . . nylon skin, soft, wavy, silver-blond hair, basic specs about 35-24-34 and enough this and that to make me feel like a matchstick drawing, a low intimate voice and everything necessary to make plainer females think about pacts with the Devil. But I did not feel apprehensive; she was a groundhog and groundhogs don't count.

"All city guides are girls," Mr. Dorcas explained. "Holly is very competent."

"Oh, I'm sure," she answered quickly and went into tourist routine number one: surprise that a guide was needed just to find her hotel, amazement at no taxicabs, same for no porters, and raised eyebrows at the prospect of two girls walking alone through "an underground city."

Mr. Dorcas was patient, ending with: "Miss Brentwood, Luna City is the only metropolis in the Solar System where a woman is really safe—no dark alleys, no deserted neighbourhoods, no criminal element."

I didn't listen; I just held out my tariff card for Mr. Dorcas to stamp and picked up her bags. Guides shouldn't carry

bags and most tourists are delighted to experience the fact that their thirty-pound allowance weighs only five pounds. But I wanted to get her moving.

We were in the tunnel outside and me with a foot on the slidebelt when she stopped. "I forgot! I want a city map."

"None available."

"Really?"

"There's only one. That's why you need a guide."

"But why don't they supply them? Or would that throw you guides out of work?"

See? "You think guiding is make-work? Miss Brentwood, labour is so scarce they'd hire monkeys if they could."

"Then why not print maps?"

"Because Luna City isn't flat like—" I almost said, "—groundhog cities," but I caught myself.

"—like Earthside cities," I went on. "All you saw from space was the meteor shield. Underneath it spreads out and goes down for miles in a dozen pressure zones."

"Yes, I know, but why not a map for each level?"

Groundhogs always say, "Yes, I know, but—"

"I can show you the one city map. It's a stereo tank twenty feet high and even so all you see clearly are big things like the Hall of the Mountain King and hydroponics farms and the Bats' Cave."

"'The Bats' Cave,'" she repeated. "That's where they fly, isn't it?"

"Yes, that where we fly."

"Oh, I want to see it!"

"OK. It first . . . or the city map?"

She decided to go to her hotel first. The regular route to the Zurich is to slide up and west through Gray's Tunnel past the Martian Embassy, get off at the Mormon Temple, and take a pressure lock down to Diana Boulevard. But I know all the shortcuts; we got off at Macy-Gimbel Upper to go down their personnel hoist. I thought she would enjoy it.

But when I told her to grab a hand grip as it dropped past her, she peered down the shaft and edged back. "You're joking."

I was about to take her back the regular way when a neighbour of ours came down the hoist. I said, "Hello, Mrs. Greenberg," and she called back, "Hi, Holly. How are your folks?"

Susie Greenberg is more than plump. She was hanging by one hand with young David tucked in her other arm and holding the *Daily Lunatic*, reading as she dropped. Miss Brentwood stared, bit her lip, and said, "How do I do it?"

I said, "Oh, use both hands; I'll take the bags." I tied the handles together with my hanky and went first.

She was shaking when we got to the bottom. "Goodness, Holly, how do you stand it? Don't you get homesick?"

Tourist question number six . . . I said, "I've been to Earth," and let it drop. Two years ago Mother made me visit my aunt in Omaha and I was *miserable*—hot and cold and dirty and beset by creepy-crawlies. I weighed a ton and I ached and my aunt was always chivvying me to go outdoors and exercise when all I wanted was to crawl into a tub and be quietly wretched. And I had hay fever. Probably you've never heard of hay fever—you don't die but you wish you could.

I was supposed to go to a girls' boarding school but I phoned Daddy and told him I was desperate and he let me come home. What groundhogs can't understand is that *they* live in savagery. But groundhogs are groundhogs and loonies are loonies and never the twain shall meet.

Like all the best hotels the Zurich is in Pressure One on the west side so that it can have a view of Earth. I helped Miss Brentwood register with the roboclerk and found her room; it had its own port. She went straight to it, began staring at Earth and going *ohh*! and *aah*!

I glanced past her and saw that it was a few minutes past thirteen; sunset sliced straight down the tip of India—early enough to snag another client. "Will that be all, Miss Brentwood?"

Instead of answering, she said in an awed voice, "Holly, isn't that the most beautiful sight you ever saw?"

"It's nice," I agreed. The view on that side is monotonous except for Earth hanging in the sky—but Earth is what tourists always look at even though they've just left it. Still, Earth is pretty. The changing weather is interesting if you don't have to be in it. Did you ever endure a summer in Omaha?

"It's gorgeous," she whispered.

"Sure," I agreed. "Do you want to go somewhere? Or will you sign my card?"

"What? Excuse me, I was daydreaming. No, not right now—yes, I do! Holly, I want to go out *there*! I must! Is there time? How much longer will it be light?"

"Huh? It's two days to sunset."

She looked startled. "How quaint. Holly, can you get us space suits? I've got to go outside."

I didn't wince—I'm used to tourist talk. I suppose a pressure suit looks like a space suit to them. I simply said, "We girls aren't licensed outside. But I can phone a friend."

Jeff Hardesty is my partner in spaceship designing, so I throw business his way. Jeff is eighteen and already in Goddard Institute, but I'm pushing hard to catch up so that we can set up offices for our firm: "Jones & Hardesty, Space-ship Engineers." I'm very bright in mathematics, which is everything in space engineering, so I'll get my degree pretty fast. Meanwhile we design ships anyhow.

I didn't tell Miss Brentwood this, as tourists think that a girl my age can't possibly be a spaceship designer.

Jeff has arranged his classes to let him guide on Tuesdays and Thursdays; he waits at West City Lock and studies between clients. I reached him on the lockmaster's phone. Jeff grinned and said, "Hi, Scale Model."

"Hi, Penalty Weight. Free to take a client?"

"Well, I was supposed to guide a family party, but they're late."

"Cancel them. Miss Brentwood . . . step into pickup, please. This is Mr. Hardesty."

Jeff's eyes widened and I felt uneasy. But it did not occur to me that Jeff could be attracted by a *groundhog* . . . even though it is conceded that men are robot slaves of their body chemistry in such matters. I knew she was exceptionally decorative, but it was unthinkable that Jeff could be captivated by any groundhog, no matter how well designed. They don't speak our language!

I am not romantic about Jeff; we are simply partners. But anything that affects Jones & Hardesty affects me.

When we joined him at West Lock he almost stepped on his tongue in a disgusting display of adolescent rut. I was ashamed of him and, for the first time, apprehensive. Why are males so childish?

Miss Brentwood didn't seem to mind his behaviour. Jeff is a big hulk; suited up for outside he looks like a Frost Giant from *Das Rheingold*; she smiled up at him and thanked him for changing his schedule. He looked even sillier and told her it was a pleasure.

I keep my pressure suit at West Lock so that when I switch a client to Jeff he can invite me to come along for the walk. This time he hardly spoke to me after that platinum menace was in sight. But I helped her pick out a suit and took her into the dressing room and fitted it. Those rental suits take careful adjusting or they will pinch you in tender places once out in vacuum . . . besides those things about them that one girl ought to explain to another.

When I came out with her, not wearing my own, Jeff didn't even ask why I hadn't suited up—he took her arm and started toward the lock. I had to butt in to get her to sign my tariff card.

The days that followed were the longest in my life. I saw Jeff only once . . . on the slidebelt in Diana Boulevard, going the other way. She was with him.

Though I saw him but once, I knew what was going on. He was cutting classes and three nights running he took her to the Earthview Room of the Duncan Hines. None of my business!—I hope she had more luck teaching him to dance than I had. Jeff is a free citizen and if he wanted to make an utter fool of himself neglecting school and losing sleep over an upholstered groundhog that was his business.

But he should not have neglected the firm's business!

Jones & Hardesty had a tremendous backlog because we were designing Starship *Prometheus*. This project we had been slaving over for a year, flying not more than twice a week in order to devote time to it—and that's a sacrifice.

Of course you can't build a starship today, because of the power plant. But Daddy thinks that there will soon be a technological break-through and mass-conversion power plants will be built—which means starships. Daddy ought to know—he's Luna Chief Engineer for Space Lanes and Fermi Lecturer at Goddard Institute. So Jeff and I are designing a self-supporting interstellar ship on that assumption: quarters, auxiliaries, surgery, labs—everything.

Daddy thinks it's just practice but Mother knows better—Mother is a mathematical chemist for General Synthetics of

Luna and is nearly as smart as I am. She realises that Jones & Hardesty plans to be ready with a finished proposal while other designers are still floundering.

Which was why I was furious with Jeff for wasting time over this creature. We had been working every possible chance. Jeff would show up after dinner, we would finish our homework, then get down to real work, the *Prometheus* . . . checking each other's computations, fighting bitterly over details, and having a wonderful time. But the very day I introduced him to Ariel Brentwood, he failed to appear. I had finished my lessons and was wondering whether to start or wait for him—we were making a radical change in power plant shielding—when his mother phoned me. "Jeff asked me to call you, dear. He's having dinner with a tourist client and can't come over."

Mrs. Hardesty was watching me so I looked puzzled and said, "Jeff thought I was expecting him? He has his dates mixed." I don't think she believed me; she agreed too quickly.

All that week I was slowly convinced against my will that Jones & Hardesty was being liquidated. Jeff didn't break any more dates—how can you break a date that hasn't been made?—but we always went flying Thursday afternoons unless one of us was guiding. He didn't call. Oh, I know where he was; he took her iceskating in Fingal's Cave.

I stayed at home and worked on the *Prometheus*, recalculating masses and moment arms for hydroponics and stores on the basis of the shielding change. But I made mistakes and twice I had to look up logarithms instead of remembering . . . I was so used to wrangling with Jeff over everything that I just couldn't function.

Presently I looked at the name plate of the sheet I was revising. "Jones & Hardesty" it read, like all the rest. I said to myself, "Holly Jones, quit bluffing; this may be The End. You knew that someday Jeff would fall for somebody."

"Of course . . . but not a *groundhog*."

"But he *did*. What kind of an engineer are you if you can't face facts? She's beautiful and rich—she'll get her father to give him a job Earthside. You hear me? *Earthside*! So you look for another partner . . . or go into business on your own."

I erased "Jones & Hardesty" and lettered "Jones & Company" and stared at it. Then I started to erase that, too—but it smeared; I had dripped a tear on it. Which was ridiculous!

The following Tuesday both Daddy and Mother were home for lunch which was unusual as Daddy lunches at the space-port. Now Daddy can't even see you unless you're a spaceship but that day he picked to notice that I had dialled only a salad and hadn't finished it. "That plate is about eight hundred calories short," he said, peering at it. "You can't boost without fuel—aren't you well?"

"Quite well, thank you," I answered with dignity.

"Mmm . . . now that I think back, you've been moping for several days. Maybe you need a checkup." He looked at Mother.

"I do not either need a checkup!" I had *not* been moping—doesn't a woman have a right not to chatter?

But I hate to have doctors poking at me so I added, "It happens I'm eating lightly because I'm going flying this afternoon. But if you insist, I'll order pot roast and potatoes and sleep instead!"

"Easy, punkin'," he answered gently. "I didn't mean to intrude. Get yourself a snack when you're through . . . and say hello to Jeff for me."

I simply answered, "OK," and asked to be excused; I was humiliated by the assumption that I couldn't fly without Mr. Jefferson Hardesty but did not wish to discuss it.

Daddy called after me, "Don't be late for dinner," and Mother said, "Now, Jacob—" and to me, "Fly until you're tired, dear; you haven't been getting much exercise. I'll leave your dinner in the warmer. Anything you'd like?"

"No, whatever you dial for yourself." I just wasn't interested in food, which isn't like me. As I headed for Bats' Cave I wondered if I had caught something. But my cheeks didn't feel warm and my stomach wasn't upset even if I wasn't hungry.

Then I had a horrible thought. Could it be that I was jealous? *Me?*

It was unthinkable. I am not romantic; I am a career woman. Jeff had been my partner and pal, and under my guidance he could have become a great spaceship designer but our relationship was straightforward . . . a mutual respect for each other's abilities, with never any of that lovey-dovey stuff. A career woman can't afford such things—why, look at all the professional time Mother had lost over having me!

No, I couldn't be jealous; I was simply worried sick because my partner had become involved with a groundhog. Jeff isn't bright about women and, besides, he's never been to Earth and has illusions about it. If she lured him Earthside, Jones & Hardesty was finished.

And somehow, "Jones & Company" wasn't a substitute: the *Prometheus* might never be built.

I was at Bats' Cave when I reached this dismal conclusion. I didn't feel like flying but I went to the locker room and got my wings anyhow.

Most of the stuff written about Bats' Cave gives a wrong impression. It's the air storage tank for the city, just like all the colonies have—the place where the scavenger pumps, deep down, deliver the air until it's needed. We just happen to be lucky enough to have one big enough to fly in. But it never was built, or anything like that; it's just a big volcanic bubble two miles across, and if it had broken through, way back when, it would have been a crater.

Tourists sometimes pity us loonies because we have no chance to swim. Well, I tried it in Omaha and got water up my nose and scared myself silly. Water is for drinking, not playing in; I'll take flying. I've heard groundhogs say, oh yes, they had "flown," many times. But that's not *flying*. I did what they talk about, between White Sands and Omaha. I felt awful and got sick. Those things aren't safe.

I left my shoes and skirt in the locker room and slipped my tail surfaces on my feet, then zipped into my wings and got someone to tighten the shoulder straps. My wings aren't ready-made condores; they are Storer-Gulls, custom-made for my weight distribution and dimensions. I've cost Daddy a pretty penny in wings, outgrowing them so often, but these latest I bought myself with guide fees.

They're lovely—titanalloy struts as light and strong as bird bones, tension-compensated wrist-pinion and shoulder joints, natural action in the alula slots, and automatic flap action in stalling. The wing skeleton is dressed in styrene feather-foils with individual quilling of scapulars and primaries. They almost fly themselves.

I folded my wings and went into the lock. While it was cycling I opened my left wing and thumbed the alula control—I had noticed a tendency to sideslip the last time I was air-

borne. But the alula opened properly and I decided I must have been overcontrolling, easy to do with Storer-Gulls; they're extremely manoeuvrable. Then the door showed green and I folded the wing and hurried out, while glancing at the barometer. Seventeen pounds—two more than Earth sea-level and nearly twice what we use in the city; even an ostrich could fly in that. I perked up and felt sorry for all groundhogs, tied down by six times proper weight who never never, *never* could fly.

Not even I could on Earth. My wing loading is less than a pound per square foot, as wings and all I weigh less than twenty pounds. Earthside that would be over a hundred pounds and I could flap forever and never get off the ground.

I felt so good that I forgot about Jeff and his weakness. I spread my wings, ran a few steps, warped for lift and grabbed air—lifted my feet and was airborne.

I sculled gently and let myself glide toward the air intake at the middle of the floor—the Baby's Ladder, we call it, because you can ride the updraft clear to the roof, half a mile above, and never move a wing. When I felt it I leaned right, spoiling with right primaries, corrected, and settled in a counterclockwise soaring glide and let it carry me toward the roof.

A couple of hundred feet up, I looked around. The cave was almost empty, not more than two hundred in the air and half that perched or on the ground—room enough for didoes. So as soon as I was up five hundred feet I leaned out of the updraft and began to beat. Gliding is no effort but flying is as hard work as you care to make it. In gliding I support a mere ten pounds on each arm—shucks, on Earth you work harder than that lying in bed. The lift that keeps you in the air doesn't take any work; you get it free from the shape of your wings just as long as there is air pouring past them.

Even without an updraft all a level glide takes is gentle sculling with your finger tips to maintain air speed; a feeble old lady could do it. The lift comes from differential air pressures but you don't have to understand it; you just scull a little and the air supports you, as if you were lying in an utterly perfect bed. Sculling keeps you moving forward just like sculling a rowboat . . . or so I'm told; I've never been in a rowboat. I had a chance to in Nebraska but I'm not that foolhardy.

But when you're really flying, you scull with forearms as well as hands and add power with your shoulder muscles. Instead of only the outer quills of your primaries changing pitch (as in gliding), now your primaries and secondaries clear back to the joint warp sharply on each downbeat and recovery they no longer lift, they force you forward—while your weight is carried by your scapulars, up under your armpits.

So you fly faster, or climb, or both, through controlling the angle of attack with your feet—with the tail surfaces you wear on your feet, I mean.

Oh dear, this sounds complicated and isn't—you just *do* it. You fly exactly as a bird flies. Baby birds can learn it and they aren't very bright. Anyhow, it's easy as breathing after you learn . . . and more fun than you can imagine !

I climbed to the roof with powerful beats, increasing my angle of attack and slotting my alulae for lift without burble—climbing at an angle that would stall most fliers. I'm little but it's all muscle and I've been flying since I was six. Once up there I glided and looked around. Down at the floor near the south wall tourists were trying glide wings—if you call those things “wings.” Along the west wall the visitors' gallery was loaded with goggling tourists. I wondered if Jeff and his Circe character were there and decided to go down and find out.

So I went into a steep dive and swooped toward the gallery, levelled off and flew very fast along it. I didn't spot Jeff and his groundhoggess but I wasn't watching where I was going and overtook another flier, almost collided. I glimpsed him just in time to stall and drop under, and fell fifty feet before I got control. Neither of us was in danger as the gallery is two hundred feet up, but I looked silly and it was my own fault; I had violated a safety rule.

There aren't many rules but they are necessary; the first is that orange wings always have the right of way—they're beginners. This flier did not have orange wings but I was overtaking. The flier underneath—or being overtaken—or nearer the wall—or turning counterclockwise, in that order, has the right of way.

I felt foolish and wondered who had seen me, so I went all the way back up, made sure I had clear air, then stooped like

a hawk toward the gallery, spilling wings, lifting tail, and letting myself fall like a rock.

I completed my stoop in front of the gallery, lowering and spreading my tail so hard I could feel leg muscles knot and grabbing air with both wings, alulae slotted. I pulled level in an extremely fast glide along the gallery. I could see their eyes pop and thought smugly, "There! That'll show 'em!"

When darn me if somebody didn't stoop on *me*! The blast from a flier braking right over me almost knocked me out of control. I grabbed air and stopped a sideslip, used some shipyard words and looked round to see who had blitzed me. I knew the black-and-gold wing pattern—Mary Muhlenburg, my best girl friend. She swung toward me, pivoting on a wing tip. "Hi, Holly! Scared you, didn't I?"

"You did not! You better be careful; the flightmaster'll ground you for a month!"

"Slim chance! He's down for coffee."

I flew away, still annoyed, and started to climb. Mary called after me, but I ignored her, thinking, "Mary my girl, I'm going to get over you and fly you right out of the air."

This was a foolish thought as Mary flies every day and has shoulders and pectoral muscles like Mrs. Hercules. By the time she caught up with me I had cooled off and we flew side by side, still climbing. "Perch?" she called out.

"Perch," I agreed. Mary has lovely gossip and I could use a breather. We turned toward our usual perch, a ceiling brace for flood lamps—it isn't supposed to be a perch but the flightmaster hardly ever comes up there.

Mary flew in ahead of me, braked and stalled dead to a perfect landing. I skidded a little but Mary stuck out a wing and steadied me. It isn't easy to come into a perch, especially when you have to approach level. Two years ago a boy who had just graduated from orange wings tried it . . . knocked off his left alula and primaries on a strut—went fluttering and spinning down two thousand feet and crashed. He could have saved himself—you can come in safely with a badly damaged wing if you spill air with the other and accept the steeper glide, then stall as you land. But this poor kid didn't know how; he broke his neck, dead as Icarus. I haven't used that perch since.

We folded our wings and Mary sidled over. "Jeff is looking for you," she said with a sly grin.

My insides jumped but I answered coolly, "So? I didn't know he was here."

"Sure. Down there," she added, pointing with her left wing. "Spot him?"

Jeff wears striped red and silver, but she was pointing at the tourist glide slope, a mile away. "No."

"He's there all right." She looked at me sideways. "But I wouldn't look him up if I were you."

"Why not? Or for that matter, why should I?" Mary can be exasperating.

"Huh? You always run when he whistles. But he has that Earthside siren in tow again today; you might find it embarrassing."

"Mary, what ever are you talking about?"

"Huh? Don't kid me, Holly Jones; you know what I mean."

"I'm sure I don't," I answered with cold dignity.

"Humph! Then you're the only person in Luna City who doesn't. Everybody knows you're crazy about Jeff; everybody knows she's cut you out . . . and that you are simply simmering with jealousy."

Mary is my dearest friend but someday I'm going to skin her for a rug. "Mary, that's preposterously ridiculous! How can you even think such a thing?"

"Look, darling, you don't have to pretend. I'm for you." She patted my shoulders with her secondaries.

So I pushed her over backwards. She fell a hundred feet, straightened out, circled and climbed, and came in beside me, still grinning. It gave me time to decide what to say.

"Mary Muhlenburg, in the first place I am not crazy about anyone, least of all Jeff Hardesty. He and I are simply friends. So it's utterly nonsensical to talk about me being 'jealous.' In the second place Miss Brentwood is a lady and doesn't go around 'cutting out' anyone, least of all me. In the third place she is simply a tourist Jeff is guiding—business, nothing more."

"Sure, sure," Mary agreed placidly. "I was wrong. Still—" She shrugged her wings and shut up.

"'Still' what? Mary, don't be mealy-mouthed."

"Mmm . . . I was wondering how you knew I was talking about Ariel Brentwood—since there isn't anything to it."

"Why, you mentioned her name."

"I did not."

I thought frantically. "Uh, maybe not. But it's perfectly simple. Miss Brentwood is a client I turned over to Jeff myself, so I assumed that she must be the tourist you meant."

"So? I don't recall even saying she was a tourist. But since she is just a tourist you two are splitting, why aren't you doing the inside guiding while Jeff sticks to outside work? I thought you guides had an agreement?"

"Huh? If he has been guiding her inside the city, I'm not aware of it—"

"You're the only one who isn't."

"—and I'm not interested; that's up to the grievance committee. But Jeff wouldn't take a fee for inside guiding in any case."

"Oh, sure!—not one he could *bank*. Well, Holly, seeing I was wrong, why don't you give him a hand with her? She wants to learn to glide."

Butting in on that pair was farthest from my mind. "If Mr. Hardesty wants my help, he will ask me. In the meantime I shall mind my own business . . . a practice I recommend to you!"

"Relax, shipmate," she answered, unruffled. "I was doing you a favour."

"Thank you, I don't need one."

"So I'll be on my way—got to practice for the gymkhana." She leaned forward and dropped off. But she didn't practice aerobatics; she dived straight for the tourist slope.

I watched her out of sight, then sneaked my left hand out the hand slit and got at my hanky—awkward when you are wearing wings but the floodlights had made my eyes water. I wiped them and blew my nose and put my hanky away and wiggled my hand back into place, then checked everything, thumbs, toes, and fingers, preparatory to dropping off.

But I didn't. I just sat there, wings drooping, and thought. I had to admit that Mary was partly right; Jeff's head was turned completely . . . over a *groundhog*. So sooner or later he would go Earthside and Jones & Hardesty was finished.

Then I reminded myself that I had been planning to be a spaceship designer like Daddy long before Jeff and I teamed up. I wasn't dependent on anyone; I could stand alone, like Joan of Arc, or Lise Meitner.

I felt better . . . a cold, stern pride, like Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*.

I recognised the red and silver of Jeff's wings while he was far off and I thought about slipping quietly away. But Jeff can overtake me if he tries, so I decided, "Holly, don't be a fool! You've no reason to run . . . just be coolly polite."

He landed by me but didn't sidle up. "Hi, Decimal Point."

"Hi, Zero. Uh, stolen much lately?"

"Just the City Bank but they made me put it back." He frowned and added, "Holly, are you mad at me?"

"Why, Jeff, whatever gave you such a silly notion?"

"Uh . . . something Mary the Mouth said."

"Her? Don't pay any attention to what *she* says. Half of it's always wrong and she doesn't mean the rest."

"Yeah, a short circuit between her ears. Then you aren't mad?"

"Of *course* not. Why should I be?"

"No reason I know of. I haven't been around to work on the ship for a few days . . . but I've been awfully busy."

"Think nothing of it. I've been terribly busy myself."

"Uh, that's fine. Look, Test Sample, do me a favour. Help me out with a friend—a client, that is—well, she's a friend too. She wants to learn to use glide wings."

I pretended to consider it. "Anyone I know?"

"Oh, yes. Fact is, you introduced us. Ariel Brentwood."

"'Brentwood?' Jeff, there are so many tourists. Let me think. Tall girl? Blonde? Extremely pretty?"

He grinned like a goof and I almost pushed him off. "That's Ariel!"

"I recall her . . . she expected me to carry her bags. But you don't need help, Jeff. She seemed very clever. Good sense of balance."

"Oh, yes, sure, all of that. Well, the fact is, I want you two to know each other. She's . . . well, she's just wonderful, Holly. A real person, all the way through. You'll love her when you know her better. Uh . . . this seemed like a good chance."

I felt dizzy. "Why, that's very thoughtful, Jeff, but I doubt if she wants to know me better. I'm just a servant she hired—you know groundhogs."

"But she's not at all like the ordinary groundhog. And she does want to know you better—she *told* me so!"

After you told her to think so! I muttered. But I had talked myself into a corner. If I had not been hampered by polite

upbringing I would have said, "On your way, vacuum skull! I'm not interested in your groundhog girl friends"—but what I did say was, "OK, Jeff," then gathered the fox to my bosom and dropped off into a glide.

So I taught Ariel Brentwood to "fly." Look, those so-called wings they let tourists wear have fifty square feet of lift surface, no controls except warp in the primaries, a built-in dihedral to make them stable as a table, and a few meaningless degrees of hinging to let the wearer think that he is "flying" by waving his arms. The tail is rigid and canted so that if you stall (almost impossible) you land on your feet. All a tourist does is run a few yards, lift up his feet (he can't avoid it) and slide down a blanket of air. Then he can tell his grandchildren how he flew, really *flew*, "just like a bird."

An ape could learn to "fly" that much.

I put myself to the humiliation of strapping on a set of the silly things and had Ariel watch while I swung into the Baby's Ladder and let it carry me up a hundred feet to show her that you really and truly could "fly" with them. Then I thankfully got rid of them, strapped her into a larger set, and put on my beautiful Storer-Gulls. I had chased Jeff away (two instructors is too many), but when he saw her wing up, he swooped down and landed by us.

I looked up. "You again."

"Hello, Ariel. Hi, Blip. Say, you've got her shoulder straps too tight."

"Tut, tut," I said. "One coach at a time, remember? If you want to help, shuck those gaudy fins and put on some gliders . . . then I'll use you to show how not to. Otherwise get above two hundred feet and stay there; we don't need any dining-lounge pilots."

Jeff pouted like a brat but Ariel backed me up. "Do what teacher says, Jeff. That's a good boy."

He wouldn't put on gliders but he didn't stay clear, either. He circled around us, watching, and got bawled out by the flightmaster for cluttering the tourist area.

I admit Ariel was a good pupil. She didn't even get sore when I suggested that she was rather mature across the hips to balance well; she just said that she had noticed that I had the slimmest behind around there and she envied me. So I

quit trying to get her goat, and found myself almost liking her as long as I kept my mind firmly on teaching. She tried hard and learned fast—good reflexes and (despite my dirty crack) good balance. I remarked on it and she admitted diffidently that she had had ballet training.

About mid-afternoon she said, "Could I possibly try real wings?"

"Huh? Gee, Ariel, I don't think so."

"Why not?"

There she had me. She had already done all that could be done with those atrocious gliders. If she was to learn more, she had to have real wings. "Ariel, it's dangerous. It's not what you've been doing, believe me. You might get hurt, even killed."

"Would you be held responsible?"

"No. You signed a release when you came in."

"Then I'd like to try it."

I bit my lip. If she had cracked up without my help, I wouldn't have shed a tear—but to let her do something too dangerous while she was my pupil . . . well, it smacked of David and Uriah. "Ariel, I can't stop you . . . but I should put my wings away and not have anything to do with it."

It was her turn to bite her lip. "If you feel that way, I can't ask you to coach me. But I still want to. Perhaps Jeff will help me."

"He probably will," I blurted out, "if he is as big a fool as I think he is!"

Her company face slipped but she didn't say anything because just then Jeff stalled in beside us. "What's the discussion?"

We both tried to tell him and confused him for he got the idea I had suggested it, and started bawling me out. Was I crazy? Was I trying to get Ariel hurt? Didn't I have any sense?

"*Shut up!*" I yelled, then added quietly but firmly, "Jefferson Hardesty, you wanted me to teach your girl friend, so I agreed. But don't butt in and don't think you can get away with talking to me like that. Now beat it! Take wing. Grab air!"

He swelled up and said slowly, "I absolutely forbid it."

Silence for five long counts. Then Ariel said quietly, "Come, Holly. Let's get me some wings."

"Right, Ariel."

But they don't rent real wings. Fliers have their own; they have to. However, there are second-hand ones for sale because kids outgrow them, or people shift to custom-made ones, or something. I found Mr. Schultz who keeps the key, and said that Ariel was thinking of buying but I wouldn't let her without a tryout. After picking over forty-odd pairs I found a set which Johnny Queveras had outgrown but which I knew were all right. Nevertheless I inspected them carefully. I could hardly reach the finger controls but they fitted Ariel.

While I was helping her into the tail surfaces I said, "Ariel? This is still a bad idea."

"I know. But we can't let men think they own us."

"I suppose not."

"They do own us, of course. But we shouldn't let them know it." She was feeling out the tail controls. "The big toes spread them?"

"Yes. But don't do it. Just keep your feet together and toes pointed. Look, Ariel, you really aren't ready. Today all you will do is glide, just as you've been doing. Promise?"

She looked me in the eye. "I'll do exactly what you say . . . not even take wing unless you OK it."

"OK. Ready?"

"I'm ready."

"All right. Wups! I goofed. They aren't orange."

"Does it matter?"

"It sure does." There followed a weary argument because Mr. Schultz didn't want to spray them orange for a tryout. Ariel settled it by buying them, then we had to wait a bit while the solvent dried.

We went back to the tourist slope and I let her guide, cautioning her to hold both alulae open with her thumbs for more lift at slow speeds, while barely sculling with her fingers. She did fine, and stumbled in landing only once. Jeff stuck around, cutting figure eights above us, but we ignored him. Presently I taught her to turn in a wide, gentle bank—you can turn those awful glider things but it takes skill; they're only meant for straight glide.

Finally I landed by her and said, "Had enough?"

"I'll never have enough ! But I'll unwing if you say."

"Tired ?"

"No." She glanced over her wing at the Baby's Ladder; a dozen fliers were going up it, wings motionless, soaring lazily. "I wish I could do that just once. It must be heaven."

I chewed it over. "Actually, the higher you are, the safer you are."

"Then why not ?"

"Mmm . . . safer *provided* you know what you're doing. Going up that draft is just gliding like you've been doing. You lie still and let it lift you half a mile high. Then you come down the same way, circling the wall in a gentle glide. But you're going to be tempted to do something you don't understand yet—flap your wings, or cut some caper."

She shook her head solemnly. "I won't do anything you haven't taught me."

I was still worried. "Look, it's only half a mile up but you cover five miles getting there and more getting down. Half an hour at least. Will your arms take it ?"

"I'm sure they will."

"Well . . . you can start down anytime; you don't have to go all the way. Flex your arms a little now and then, so they won't cramp. Just don't flap your wings."

"I won't."

"OK." I spread my wings. "Follow me."

I led her into the updraft, leaned gently right, then back left to start the counterclockwise climb, all the while sculling very slowly so that she could keep up. Once we were in the groove I called out, "Steady as you are !" and cut out suddenly climbed and took station thirty feet over and behind her.

"Ariel ?"

"Yes, Holly ?"

"I'll stay over you. Don't crane your neck; you don't have to watch me, I have to watch you. You're doing fine."

"I feel fine !"

"Wiggle a little. Don't stiffen up. It's a long way to the roof. You can scull harder if you want to."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n !"

"Not tired ?"

"Heavens, no ! Girl, I'm living !" She giggled. "And mama said I'd never be an angel !"

I didn't answer because red-and-silver wings came charging at me, braked suddenly and settled into the circle between me and Ariel. Jeff's face was almost as red as his wings.

"What the devil do you think you are doing?"

"Orange wings!" I yelled. "Keep clear!"

"Get down out of here! Both of you!"

"Get out from between me and my pupil. You know the rules."

"Ariel!" Jeff shouted. "Lean out of the circle and glide down. I'll stay with you."

"Jeff Hardesty," I said savagely, "I give you three seconds to get out from between us—then I'm going to report you for violation of Rule One. For the third time — *Orange Wings!*"

Jeff growled something, dipped his right wing and dropped out of formation. The idiot sideslipped within five feet of Ariel's wing tip. I should have reported him for that; all the room you can give a beginner is none too much.

I said, "OK, Ariel?"

"OK, Holly. I'm sorry Jeff is angry."

"He'll get over it. Tell me if you feel tired."

"I'm not. I want to go all the way up. How high are we?"

"Four hundred feet, maybe."

Jeff flew below us a while, then climbed and flew over us . . . probably for the same reason I did: to see better. It suited me to have two of us watching her as long as he didn't interfere; I was beginning to fret that Ariel might not realise that the way down was going to be as long and tiring as the way up. I was hoping she would cry uncle. I knew I could glide until forced down by starvation. But a beginner gets tense.

Jeff stayed generally over us, sweeping back and forth—he's too active to glide very long—while Ariel and I continued to soar, winding slowly up toward the roof. It finally occurred to me when we were about halfway up that I could cry uncle myself; I didn't have to wait for Ariel to weaken. So I called out, "Ariel? Tired now?"

"No."

"Well, I am. Could we go down, please?"

She didn't argue, she just said, "All right. What am I to do?"

"Lean right and get out of the circle." I intended to have her move out five or six hundred feet, get into the return down draft, and circle the cave down instead of up. I glanced up, looking for Jeff. I finally spotted him some distance away and much higher but coming toward us. I called out, "Jeff!"

See you on the ground." He might not have heard me but he would see if he didn't hear; I glanced back at Ariel.

I couldn't find her.

Then I saw her, a hundred feet below—flailing her wings and falling, out of control.

I didn't know how it happened. Maybe she leaned too far, went into a sideslip and started to struggle. But I didn't try to figure it out; I was simply filled with horror. I seemed to hang there frozen for an hour, while I watched her.

But the fact appears to be that I screamed "*Jeff!*" and broke into a stoop.

But I didn't seem to fall, couldn't overtake her. I spilled my wings completely—but couldn't manage to fall; she was as far away as ever.

You do start slowly, of course; our low gravity is the only thing that makes human flying possible. Even a stone falls a scant three feet in the first second. But that first second seemed endless.

Then I knew I was falling, I could feel rushing air—but I still didn't seem to close on her. Her struggles must have slowed her somewhat, while I was in an intentional stoop, wings spilled and raised over my head, falling as fast as possible. I had a wild notion that if I could pull even with her, I could shout sense into her head, het her to dive, then straighten out in a glide. But I couldn't *reach* her.

This nightmare dragged on for hours.

Actually we didn't have room to fall for more than twenty seconds; that's all it takes to stoop a thousand feet. But twenty seconds can be horribly long . . . long enough to regret every foolish thing I had ever done or said, long enough to say a prayer for us both . . . and to say goodbye to Jeff in my heart. Long enough to see the floor rushing toward us and know that we were both going to crash if I didn't overtake her mighty quick.

I glanced up and Jeff was stooping right over us but a long way up. I looked down at once . . . and I was overtaking her . . . I was passing her—*I was under her!*

Then I was braking with everything I had, almost pulling my wings off. I grabbed air, held it, and started to beat without ever going into level flight. I beat once, twice, three times . . . and hit her from below, jarring us both.

Then the floor hit us.

I felt feeble and dreamily contented. I was on my back in a dim room. I think Mother was with me and I know Daddy was. My nose itched and I tried to scratch it, but my arms wouldn't work. I fell asleep again.

I woke up hungry and wide awake. I was in a hospital bed and my arms still wouldn't work, which wasn't surprising as they were both in casts. A nurse came in with a tray. "Hungry?" she asked.

"Starved," I admitted.

"We'll fix that." She started feeding me like a baby.

I dodged the third spoonful and demanded, "What happened to my arms?"

"Hush," she said and gagged me with a spoon.

But a nice doctor came in later and answered my question. "Nothing much. Three simple fractures. At your age you'll heal in no time. But we like your company so I'm holding you for observation of possible internal injury."

"I'm not hurt inside," I told him. "At least, I don't hurt."

"I told you it was just an excuse."

"Uh, Doctor?"

"Well?"

"Will I be able to fly again?" I waited, scared.

"Certainly. I've seen men hurt worse get up and go three rounds."

"Oh. Well, thanks. Doctor? What happened to the other girl? Is she . . . did she . . .?"

"Brentwood? She's here."

"She's right here," Ariel agreed from the door. "May I come in?"

My jaw dropped, then I said, "Yeah. Sure. Come in."

The doctor said, "Don't stay long," and left. I said, "Well, sit down."

"Thanks." She hopped instead of walked and I saw that one foot was bandaged. She got on the end of the bed.

"You hurt your foot."

She shrugged. "Nothing. A sprain and a torn ligament. Two cracked ribs. But I would have been dead. You know why I'm not?"

I didn't answer. She touched one of my casts. "That's why. You broke my fall and I landed on top of you. You saved my life and I broke both your arms."

"You don't have to thank me. I would have done it for anybody."

"I believe you and I wasn't thanking you. You can't thank a person for saving your life. I just wanted to make sure you knew that I knew it."

I didn't have an answer so I said, "Where's Jeff? Is he all right?"

"He'll be along soon. Jeff's not hurt . . . though I'm surprised he didn't break both ankles. He stalled in beside us so hard that he should have. But Holly . . . Holly my very dear . . . I slipped in so that you and I could talk about him before he got here."

I changed the subject quickly. Whatever they had given me made me feel dreamy and good, but not beyond being embarrassed. "Ariel, what happened? You were getting along fine—then suddenly you were in trouble."

She looked sheepish. "My own fault. You said we were going down, so I looked down. Really looked, I mean. Before that, all my thoughts had been about climbing clear to the roof; I hadn't thought about how far down the floor was. Then I looked down . . . and got dizzy and panicky and went all to pieces." She shrugged. "You were right. I wasn't ready."

I thought about it and nodded. "I see. But don't worry—when my arms are well, I'll take you up again."

She touched my foot. "Dear Holly. But I won't be flying again; I'm going back where I belong."

"Earthside?"

"Yes. I'm taking the *Billy Mitchell* on Wednesday."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

She frowned slightly. "Are you? Holly, you don't like me, do you?"

I was startled silly. What can you say? Especially when it's true? "Well," I said slowly, "I don't dislike you. I just don't know you very well."

She nodded. "And I don't know you very well . . . even though I got to know you a lot better in a very few seconds. But Holly . . . listen please and don't get angry. It's about Jeff. He hasn't treated you very well the last few days—while I've been here, I mean. But don't be angry with him. I'm leaving and everything will be the same."

That ripped it open and I couldn't ignore it, because if I did, she would assume all sorts of things that weren't so. So I had to explain . . . about me being a career woman . . . how, if I had seemed upset, it was simply distress at breaking

up the firm of Jones & Hardesty before it even finished its first starship . . . how I was *not* in love with Jeff but simply valued him as a friend and associate . . . but if Jones & Hardesty couldn't carry on, then Jones & Company would. "So you see, Ariel, it isn't necessary for you to give up Jeff. If you feel you owe me something, just forget it. It isn't necessary."

She blinked and I saw with amazement that she was holding back tears. "Holly, Holly . . . you don't understand at all."

"I understand all right. I'm not a child."

"No, you're a grown woman . . . but you haven't found it out." She held up a finger. "One—Jeff doesn't love me."

"I don't believe it."

"Two . . . I don't love him."

"I don't believe that, either."

"Three . . . you say you don't love him—but we'll take that up when we come to it. Holly, am I beautiful?"

Changing the subject is a female trait but I'll never learn to do it that fast. "Huh?"

"I said, 'Am I beautiful?'"

"You know darn well you are!"

"Yes. I can sing a bit and dance, but I would get few parts if I were not, because I'm no better than a third-rate actress. So I have to be beautiful. How old am I?"

I managed not to boggle. "Huh? Older than Jeff thinks you are. Twenty-one, at least. Maybe twenty-two."

She sighed. "Holly, I'm old enough to be your mother."

"Huh? I don't believe that, either."

"I'm glad it doesn't show. But that's why, though Jeff is a dear, there never was a chance that I could fall in love with him. But how I feel about him doesn't matter; the important thing is that *he* loves *you*."

"*What?* That's the silliest thing you've said yet! Oh, he *likes* me—or did. But that's all." I gulped. "And it's all I want. Why, you should hear the way he talks to me."

"I have. But boys that age can't say what they mean; they get embarrassed."

"But—"

"Wait, Holly. I saw something you didn't because you were knocked cold. When you and I bumped, do you know what happened?"

"Uh, no."

"Jeff arrived like an avenging angel, a split second behind us. He was ripping his wings off as he hit, getting his arms free. He didn't even look at me. He just stepped across me and picked you up and cradled you in his arms, all the while bawling his eyes out."

"He *did*?"

"He did."

I mulled it over. Maybe the big lunk did kind of like me, after all.

Ariel went on, "So you see, Holly, even if you don't love him, you must be very gentle with him, because he loves you and you can hurt him terribly."

I tried to think. Romance was still something that a career woman should shun . . . but if Jeff really did feel that way—well . . . would it be compromising my ideals to marry him just to keep him happy? To keep the firm together? Eventually, that is?

But if I did, it wouldn't be Jones & Hardesty; it would be Hardesty & Hardesty.

Ariel was still talking: "—you might even fall in love with him. It does happen, hon, and if it did, you'd be sorry if you had chased him away. Some other girl would grab him; he's awfully nice."

"But—" I shut up for I heard Jeff's step—I can always tell it. He stopped in the door and looked at us, frowning.

"Hi, Ariel."

"Hi, Jeff."

"Hi, Fraction." He looked me over. "My, but you're a mess."

"You aren't pretty yourself. I hear you have flat feet."

"Permanently. How do you brush your teeth with those things on your arms?"

"I don't."

Ariel slid off the bed, balanced on one foot. "Must run. See you later, kids."

"So long, Ariel."

"Good-bye, Ariel. Uh . . . thanks."

Jeff closed the door after she hopped away, came to the bed and said gruffly, "Hold still."

Then he put his arms around me and kissed me.

Well, I couldn't stop him, could I? With both arms broken? Besides, it was consonant with the new policy for

the firm. I was startled speechless because Jeff never kisses me, except birthday kisses, which don't count. But I tried to kiss back and show that I appreciated it.

I don't know what that stuff was they had been giving me but my ears began to ring and I felt dizzy again.

Then he was leaning over me. "Runt," he said mournfully, "you sure give me a lot of grief."

"You're no bargain yourself, flathead," I answered with dignity.

"I suppose not." He looked me over sadly. "What are you crying for?"

I didn't know that I had been. Then I remembered why. "Oh, Jeff—I busted my pretty wings!"

"We'll get you more. Uh, brace yourself. I'm going to do it again."

"All right." He did.

I suppose Hardesty & Hardesty has more rhythm than Jones & Hardesty.

It really sounds better.

Robert A. Heinlein

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

"Sector General," James White's lead novelette next month contains some of the most entertaining and interesting angles on futuristic medicine and surgery yet written. Picture a gigantic floating hospital somewhere in galactic space, its wards all designed to accommodate differing forms of life, its doctors capable of dealing with innumerable sentient beings under completely alien conditions. Into this vast structure dives a runaway spaceship, leaving behind it a trail of unstable gravities, escaping gases and fluids, and injured aliens. It is the story of the doctors who have to enter the ensuing shambles — and of one in particular, Conway, who has a chip on his shoulder.

There are also numerous supporting stories, as usual, but one we recommend in particular is J. C. Ballard's "Manhole 69."

Here is a brief little vignette by a new writer built around a fear-complex. Just how much can the imagination build in the mind when given certain salient facts ? And how dominant can the mind become over the body when an answer to the fear-complex has to be found ?

A SUDDEN DARKNESS

By D. M. Parks

Night happened on Teryn V like the sudden dropping of a velvet curtain. Brad Powell stood quite still for a moment, totally blind in the darkness.

He was a tall, fair-haired man, with a thin body, taut as a bow string in his close fitting grey coveralls. Around him he could hear the vague life sounds of the alien planet; the wind hissing through the long grass, the call of some unidentified animal.

This was the first time he had been called upon to fulfil his function as relief pilot of the supply ship. It was also the first time he had been quite alone in the night of Teryn V. He had been unaccustomed to darkness of any kind aboard the *Magellan*. Under normal circumstances he would have

remained aboard the immaculate beryllium-steel base ship for the remainder of the tour; safe in the carefully conditioned, aseptic atmosphere of its interior.

Powell licked his lips, swallowing with difficulty, and told himself urgently that there was no reason to worry, no reason at all. The exploration party had been down here for six months now; nosing around and picking up samples for the specialists on the *Magellan* to examine, and so far there had not been one casualty. Cortman, the exploration chief, was sure that once more they had hit the jackpot of interstellar space, a livable, earth-type planet.

Powell found that his eyes had adapted themselves and he could now see the outlines of his surroundings in the pale glow of the sparsely star-flecked sky. And only a quarter of a mile ahead the lights of the Exploration Command site glowed reassuringly.

The grass at his feet rustled briefly. He forced himself to look downwards and saw a small, jerkily moving shape. He kicked out with his high laced boot and the creature scurried away. Repressing the tremor of his limbs he began to walk towards the lights. He refused to run, pushing down the primeval panic thoughts that struggled for conscious recognition. Even here, quite alone, it was important to himself that he should maintain this outward show of dignity.

The interior of Cortman's living quarters was warm and familiar. Powell settled into a foam upholstered chair and accepted the drink which the squat, dark-haired little exploration chief offered him.

"Try one of my specials," Cortman rumbled cheerily.

Powell sipped the contents of the glass, savouring the syrupy sweetness underneath which lay the mailed fist of neat alcohol. "Thanks . . . just what I need." His voice was loud, and a few tones too high.

"Are you all right?" Cortman's head was slightly to one side, examining him.

Powell raised a hand to cover the sudden tightening of his mouth. *Damn the man, why couldn't he mind his own business?*

"Yes, of course. Just getting my bearings, that's all," he replied gruffly.

Cortman turned away and busied himself at the little portable high-frequency cooker. "Sorry you got caught out

there like that. I should have mentioned it. These Teryn sunsets are a dilly—like sticking your head in a sack.”

Powell wished the man would drop the subject. “Have you got the remainder of your stuff ready for loading in the morning? I want to get off as soon after daybreak as I can.”

Cortman placed two steaming plates of food on the table and pulled up a chair. “Don’t worry about a thing. We can get the whole issue aboard in about half an hour—then you can roar off back to your beloved base ship.” He started to shovel the food into his broad mouth. “Come on, man, dig in. This is just like mother used to make.”

Powell smiled briefly and began to pick unenthusiastically. “What’s this green stuff?” he enquired.

“Local—a sort of broad-leafed weed that grows all over the place. It’s good, tastes like asparagus.” Cortman was munching away happily. “Better than that re-constituted, defrozen junk you have out there, eh? We always try to live off the land as much as possible as soon as we’ve done the preliminary rundown on a planet.”

“Is that wise? I mean, how do you know . . .?”

Cortman patted his growing corporation. “There’s your answer. Twenty-five earth-type planets have helped me cultivate it.” He pointed to a gooey red mess on his plate. “Take this, for instance; fungus that grows near the river beds. Packed full of vitamins and tastes like a good rare steak. The colonists who settle here are going to be lucky people.”

Powell continued his meal, forcing his protesting stomach to accept every unfamiliar-tasting mouthful until his plate was as clean as Cortman’s. To leave the smallest morsel would be a gesture of defeat, an acknowledgement of his softness.

Cortman picked up the plates and thrust them into the disposal chute. “I expect Johnson will be back next trip?”

“Yes, they’ll have him out of sick bay in a day or two,” Powell said.

Cortman handed him another drink. “Not much point in your going back to the ship tonight. Why don’t you stay here? Then we can all go out together in the morning.”

Powell had been hoping that Cortman would make just this suggestion, but he hesitated before answering. He eyed the exploration chief covertly for a moment, searching for any sign of patronage which would immediately make him

unable to accept the invitation. "All right," he replied ungraciously.

Cortman took a long draught and stretched himself luxuriously. "Yes, it's quite a place, this Teryn. Wouldn't mind sticking around here for good—with the right kind of company of course. But I suppose we shall be moving on in another month or so."

"Perhaps you'll come back here some time?"

Cortman shook his head. "I've given up making promises like that to myself. Exploration Command men are like rivers—they just go on and on, they never go back. Perhaps it's best that way; in another year or two this place will be crawling with colonials, all intent on making it as near to a carbon copy of Earth as they can." He snorted. "Bringing it all the *benefits* of civilisation."

There was something in this attitude which escaped Powell entirely. He suspected that it was some kind of a pose. After all, how would Cortman and his kind ever get to alien planets like this one without the advantages of a civilised, technological culture?

"What about the animals?" he said, turning the conversation into more practical channels.

"We've got them in the clearing there; all in cages ready for the morning," Cortman said. "Thought it would be best to leave them out there overnight. Poor little devils might as well see as much of their natural environment as they can in the time that's left to them."

Now he is sentimental about animals, marvelled Powell. "What's this Briak thing Everard is so keen on getting hold of?"

Cortman replenished the glasses. "The Briak? I thought the Psyche boys would be interested in my report on that. Briak is what the locals call it—as far as our semanticists can make out Briak is also their name for a mirror, or a reflection of any kind. It has no intelligence of its own to speak of—about on a par with the earth rat, Mackeson says."

Powell gripped his half empty glass convulsively and looked up quickly to see if the explorer had noticed.

"It seems to have developed something quite unusual in the line of survival mechanisms," continued Cortman. "It absorbs the emotional content of any other mind within a radius of a few yards and re-transmits the pure emotion,

amplifying it at the same time. It's interesting to see the natives hunting the Briak—they literally love them into their traps."

"Why do they hunt them? I understood from what you told me that the Teryns are mainly vegetarians."

"They keep them as pets, for some obscure reason," said Cortman. "I've a hunch that they've developed a technique of using the things as a sort of happiness amplifier, but I'm quite content to leave such details to Everard and his head-shrinkers."

"You mean that the Briak just shoots back any emotion that is directed towards it, whatever that emotion may be?" asked Powell.

Cortman nodded. "That's more or less the idea, but I think that may only be a sort of side effect. It's quite possible that the main purpose of this talent is the transmission of its own emotion. After all, what better way to escape the jaws of some carnivore than petrifying the darned thing with an amplified replica of your own fear reaction?"

The loading had proceeded without a hitch, despite the fact that Powell's head was throbbing and his mouth parched with the after-effects of Cortman's innocuous seeming liquor. He was bent over the control panel, checking his blastoff trajectory when Cortman appeared in the main lock carrying something boxlike under his arm.

"Found this tucked away in the back of one of the trucks," said the exploration chief cheerily. "What shall I do with it?"

"Just stick it down anywhere, I'll stow it later. And get clear, will you? If I don't blast off in just two minutes from now I shall have to run through this stuff all over again." Powell switched the motors to warm up and turned his attention back to the calculator.

"Fair enough," Cortman said. "Give my regards to the admiral."

Powell grunted. Humour was not his strong point—especially the way he felt this morning. He waited until Cortman was away, then sealed hatches and blasted clear of Teryn V.

Half an hour later he killed the engines. A quick check showed that another twenty-six hours on this course would bring him slap bang alongside the *Magellan*, with not an ounce of fuel wasted. Powell was proud of his ability as a pilot.

Here in the shining interior of a ship he was confident, conscious of the power that lay beneath the touch of his fingers.

He eased himself out of the pilot chair and glanced round the control cabin. A square, box-like object lay on the deck near the main lock. He was puzzled for a moment as to its origin, and then he remembered Cortman's last-minute arrival. Walking across the cabin he bent down to look through the glass front of the small cage.

He breathed inwards sharply as a pair of pink, beady eyes stared back at him. The animal in the cage was small, with drab, dirty-looking fur and a tail almost as long as its body. Its snout was long and pointed with two front incisors which protruded slightly. He could hear the scrabbling of its small, clawed forefeet as it scratched at the bottom of the cage.

He stayed there, bent forward in an unnatural position, for several minutes. The animal scratched in its small, savage frenzy at its prison, its eyes locked on those of the man.

There was something loathsome and unclean about the sight of the thing. Powell could imagine the lice that crawled beneath that drab fur—lice carrying some filthy disease. And those white teeth which were now gnawing against the glass and metal of the cage—one bite from them could contain the poison to send him into a convulsive, insane death.

The repellent creature held every atom of Powell's attention, setting up in his mind a chain reaction of nauseous loathing and horror which built itself to a trembling peak. He broke away finally, retching, his body sticky with sweat.

The feeling was still with him as he staggered back to the pilot seat and slumped back exhausted. Even though he purposely turned his back on the cage and its occupant he was not able to rid himself of the memory of that repulsive, filthy body and the scaly flesh-colour of its long tail. It was as if a feedback circuit had been set up in his mind, constantly yammering at his sanity; tugging him inexorably to turn his head again and look at the thing.

He forced himself to think rationally, to hold on to the familiar things. Why should the animal have this effect on him?

Then he remembered Cortman's words of the previous night, and with them came such a flush of anger that he was once again able to grip and hold his concentration. 'What

better way . . . than petrifying a carnivore with the feedback of your own fear reaction ?'

The fool ! The unutterable, careless fool !

With every ounce of will he could muster Powell dragged himself from the pilot chair and walked slowly, with eyes averted towards the cage containing *the Briak*. Cortman had said its range was a few yards. How many were *a few* ? Perhaps if he could pick up the cage and carry it into the rear hold of the ship he would be free of the influence of the thing. To change the nature of his own emotion towards it was the only other way to rid himself of this fear, but that was beyond his conscious volition, it poured unbidden, uncontrollable from the animal centres of his own brain.

Carefully, slowly he felt forward with his foot. If only he did not look at the *Briak* he might be able to maintain control of himself. His foot contacted the side of the cage and he stopped quite still for a moment, his whole body tensed. He could hear the scrabbling of small sharp claws on the inside of the cage.

His breath rasped hoarsely as he began to bend his knees, arms stretched downwards and a rivulet of perspiration coursed down the side of his nose.

At last his hands contacted the cool surface of the top of the cage and he could feel the vibration of the scratching now through his fingertips. Carefully, still looking away, he slid his hands down the sides of the cage and levered his fingers underneath. With a quick movement he straightened up, tucking the cage close underneath his right arm, hugging it against his body.

He stood for a moment, fighting back the waves of nausea. Everything in his being called to him to drop the cage and run screaming—*where* ? Slowly, stiff-legged, he walked along the corridor towards the door of the rear hold.

Movement inside the cage had stopped now, but that was even more dreadful; he found himself fighting the temptation to look down at it, to make sure that the *Briak* was still inside. But no, it must be. He dare not risk that closed circuit of mounting fear again.

The door of the hold yielded easily to the touch of his left hand and he was inside. The cages containing the other animals were far away at the other end of the compartment, hidden by the heaped packing cases full of samples of every kind. Powell could carry his burden no further. On his

right was a waist-high case of geological specimens. He slid the cage carefully onto its smooth top, turning the glass front of it away from him as he did so. Then he moved quickly towards the door, pausing only to glance back for a moment at the blank metal back of the cage.

He slammed the door behind him and hurried back to the front of the ship. Fear was still there, but only as an under-current stream. Now he was free to reflect on his behaviour and to savour the manner in which he despised himself.

Thank God he was alone on the ship. The thought of his conduct of the past few minutes being witnessed by another person was humiliating beyond endurance.

The ship was still on course, but he checked the familiar things for the sake of the comfort in them. Then he went into the small galley, but the thought of food only increased the latent nausea. He was aware also of a great aching weariness. Opening a small cabinet on the wall he poured half a dozen small white pills into his shaking hand. Thrusting them into his mouth he washed them down with a great gulp of sterile, ice-cold water and lay down on his bunk to search for relaxation.

The light bothered him, searing through even his closed lids. He lifted himself wearily off the bunk and switched it off. The darkness moved in on him like a black slime, filling his nostrils and choking the life from his labouring lungs. He switched the light on again and it rasped at his eyes mercilessly. Then he thought of a compromise. Opening the door about six inches he switched off the light again. A diffused glow from the control room seeped through the opening. It was just enough to enable him to see the familiar outlines, without the harshness of the ceiling tube.

His need of rest was a tearing hunger. He staggered back and lay prone on the bunk. Despite the drug he lay awake a long time, jerking himself back to full consciousness again and again in his efforts to control the downward spiral of his thoughts.

He was a child again, only half aware of the wonder that was his own body. The soft warmth of the woolly blanket was around him and the sun shone through the branches of the old apple tree. There was a soft movement near his feet and a

musty, unclean smell came to his infant nostrils. Closer now, he could feel the movement along his legs, slowly, cautiously.

Struggling with fear-quickenened reflexes he attempted to raise himself on as yet unco-ordinated muscles . . . and failed. A whimper trickled from his tiny throat, dribbling out of his toothless mouth and dying ineffectually.

It was crawling up towards him now. He screwed up his eyes. But no, he had to see. He strained his inefficient neck muscles forward. An animal—not the woolly bunny or the golden teddy bear of his nursery, but a dirty, sniffing thing with beady, malicious eyes and a pointed snout. The stench was all enveloping now. He screamed. High and loud the sound poured out of his infantile lungs . . .

Powell awoke, threshing on the bunk. The scream was still there; the high pitched yell of the meteor evasion warning. It smashed his consciousness back to the awareness of the present with its brazen lash. Reaching up he braced himself against the steadying hand-grips just in time.

The ship lurched sickeningly as the motors were cut in by the meteor evasion circuit. Briefly, for the few seconds required to take her out of the collision orbit, then they died again.

Powell forced his aching limbs out of the bunk and walked back into the control cabin. There bending over the dials and his computer he was able to immerse himself for a few minutes in the work of course correction. Then he lay back in the sparse comfort of the pilot seat. The darkness was crawling back into his mind in a steady, sticky stream, forming dank pools of horror. A thought which he tried in vain to ignore tugged at his attention.

He checked the chronometer. Another eighteen hours to go. And sleep? No, that was impossible now. And there was something he *had* to do—something he *must* check on.

He fought against it for thirty ageless minutes. Then slowly, with the steady, glassy-eyed purposefulness of a hypnotic subject he rose from the chair and walked down the corridor towards the door of the rear hold.

He paused for a moment with his hand on the cool metal, trying to will himself to go back. But it was no good—he *had to know*. He pulled the door open with a jerky movement.

The breath stopped in his throat with an audible click. On the deck at his feet, exuding the musty, reminiscent smell, lay the small cage. The glass of its front had been shattered by

the fall from the top of the packing case. *And it was quite empty.*

He looked fearfully round the compartment. It seemed suddenly full of flickering shadows. Behind the cartons there, or by the ventilation shaft there . . . He was searching now compulsively, for the skittering shape he hoped to God would not reveal itself. And yet if he could not stand the sight of it, the concealment was even worse.

Somewhere, etching itself deep in the structure of his mind, he heard the scrabbling of small, sharp claws. With a high mewling sound of terror he rushed out of the compartment and slammed the door behind him.

It was several minutes before he could ease himself away from the support of the door and force himself on trembling legs back towards the control cabin.

With the musty smell still clinging in his nostrils he collapsed once more into the pilot seat. Behind him, everywhere was the sound of scratching, scrabbling. Every small sound of the ship transposed itself into the pattern, dragging at his sanity. Time and again he swept fearful eyes round the shining metal walls, sobbing, shouting in his delirium of terror; obsessed with the idea that the Briak was here, that every time he moved his eyes it was there, just out of sight, watching him, pouring back into him the terror that emanated from his mind.

And then the nightmare was over. The huge outline of the *Magellan* flowed into focus on the forward view screen. He matched velocity and switched on his communicator.

"Powell to *Magellan*. Supply ship from Teryn V on your starboard bow. Request berthing instructions."

"*Magellan* here. You'll have to hold off for a while; supply ship for 111 is still loading in main bay."

Powell swallowed convulsively. *Of all the times for such a thing to happen.* "How long will I have to wait?"

"What's your hurry, Brad?" The voice of the base ship operator was unconcerned, remote. "Seven, eight hours, maybe. We'll call you when we can handle you."

Seven, perhaps eight hours! Panic hammered at Powell's mind, but he *must* keep his voice calm. "O.K. I'll come over in my suit—the ship can take care of herself for a few hours."

"Anything wrong, Brad?" The voice was suddenly solicitous, expectant.

"No, damn you!" The words ripped off Powell's tongue before he could stop himself. *What was the operator prying for? Such procedure was common practice amongst delayed pilots.*

"All right, Powell—don't fly off the handle." The *Magellan's* operator signed off abruptly.

Powell donned his space-suit quickly, eager to be away from the scene of his nightmare. He felt almost elated as he stepped into the airlock and closed the door behind him. The yellow light above his head went on and air began to leak out into space with a high pitched hiss.

He bent down to pick up his helmet . . . and froze. In the corner of the seat opposite him, flattened against the shining metal of the wall, was the Briak. The air hissed. In a moment the red light would be flicking on. There was no way to stop its outward rush now.

In a moment both he and the animal would be dead if he did not don his helmet. Everard was expecting him to bring the Briak—he could not let it die now. If he did he could never explain without confessing the humiliating story of his panic. It would be better to die here now, alone.

There was one other way . . .

The Briak looked suddenly helpless, as if it knew that death was near. It was quite unresisting as Powell lunged forward and grabbed for it. There was no time for fear; this was what he had to do.

He thrust the warm, trembling body down through the neck aperture of his suit. It lay there, quite still against his breast. He was already gasping for oxygen in the rarified air. Slamming his helmet into place he switched on the suit's supply.

A few seconds later the red light flickered on and soon after that the outer door of the lock opened soundlessly. Powell dived out into space and switched on his suit propulsion unit.

As soon as there was sufficient air in the lock of the *Magellan* Powell removed his helmet and picked the limp Briak from its place of safety. He held it cradled in his hands, looking down at its drab fur and pink eyes. The fear was completely gone now. Perhaps somehow the small intelligence of the animal had understood and was trying to repay him; or was it just that he had conquered the rotten thing in his own mind which had preyed on him unknown throughout his whole life?

He was smiling with quiet satisfaction as he stepped out of the lock into the interior of the *Magellan*. Now no one would ever know what a fool he had made of himself alone on the supply ship. They would never guess that this small animal had held his mind in a grip of terror from which there had seemed no way of escape.

Everard was waiting, fingering his lush, sandy moustache. "Hallo, Brad. Are you all right? Communications seemed a bit worried about you."

"They did?" Powell's new-found confidence allowed him to absorb this reflection on his self-sufficiency without rancour. He felt the small, pulsing life of the creature which he held in his palm, and the smile stayed in place.

"Did you get the Briak?" Everard asked eagerly.

Powell held up the animal. "Of course—never let a pal down."

Everard looked puzzled. "Stow it, Brad. Those darned Teryn rats breed like flies; I've got six cages full of them. Why the devil did Cortman send another? Him and his sense of humour. The Briak is what I want—a black thing, about the size of a cat, with a single white stripe running down its spine . . ."

D. M. Parks



SENSE OF WONDER

We have been hearing a lot of comment from various quarters of the planet that science fiction has lost its "sense of wonder." Bertram Chandler has turned this interesting controversy into a neat space story, although how true it may eventually become depends entirely upon the individual to whom the events occur.

By Bertram Chandler

"Science fiction isn't what it was," said Crowell.

"Was it ever?" asked Samuels.

"Not very funny," said Whiting. "I agree with Bill. Science fiction isn't what it was—and for that I blame the authors and publishers of factual books on astronautics and the like. If those books had to be written, their sale should have been restricted to science fiction writers only. Our predecessors in the field had it easy. Their bold heroes could leap aboard their spaceships, press a couple of buttons and whiffle off to Proxima Centauri at fourteen times the speed of light. They didn't have to worry about escape velocity, mass ratio and all the rest of it. The Lorenz-Fitzgerald equation meant nothing in their lives—or the lives of their readers. They could populate Mars with beautiful, oviparous princesses (I've often wondered why John Carter's girl friends had such well developed mammary glands) and get away with it." He lifted his glass. "Here's to the good old days, when the likes of us didn't have to beat their brains out trying to satisfy a public of potential Ph.D.s!"

"All very well said, George," admitted Crowell, "but it wasn't quite what I meant. After all, I'm an editor and, as such, I read far more s-f than either you or John. My growl is this—so very little of the stuff written today has even the slightest touch of the old sense of wonder. You were sneering at Burroughs' Martian romances just now, weren't you? I agree with you that they're far from scientific. But if you're honest, you'll agree with me that Burroughs' Mars was a far more wonderful place than, say, Clarke's. Barsoom was *real*, in a way that the planet reached by orthodox rocketry, populated, or otherwise, according to sound scientific principles, never has been . . ."

"You started this," said Samuels. "You're an editor—you decide whether to buy our stories or to add to our fine collections of rejection slips. Therefore—kindly define this sense of wonder. If we knew what it was we could *saturate* our work with it . . ."

"If I knew just what it was," said Crowell thoughtfully, "I'd tell you blighters just what I wanted . . ."

"Perhaps," said Whiting, "it all ties up with what I was saying. Look at it this way. You're a writer way back in the good old days. You're even, for the sake of the argument, old H. G. Wells himself. You've gone to all the trouble to invent the Cavorite that the modern rocket boys are always sneering at. But it works for you. And then—*Why, I'm the First Man on the Moon!* you think. Everything's so brand, spanking new. You feel a sense of wonder—and you put it across to your readers. But write a Moon story these days—and where does it get you? Wells has been there before, and Heinlein, and Clarke, and Campbell, and . . . Well, just tell me the name of anybody who *hasn't* written a first men in the Moon story—if you can! It's the same with Mars, and Venus, and the whole damned Solar System. It's the same with the interstellar voyages."

"Time Travel's as bad," said Samuels. "Wells' *The Time Machine* was good, and had the sense of wonder that Bill's been bellyaching about. The only thing that you can do with Time Travel *now* is to give one of the tired old paradoxes a new twist."

"And there's no sense of wonder in *that*," objected Crowell.

"There's a sense of wonder at the author's ingenuity," said Whiting.

"Not the same, George. Not the same. What I'm after, and what nobody will give me, is something on the lines of Keats' 'magic casements fronting perilous seas . . .' Why, *why* can't any of you stare at the Martian desert with as wild a surmise as stout Cortez stared at the Pacific?"

"I wish we could," replied Whiting. "I wish we could."

"The trouble," murmured Whiting, "is that we're all too blase . . ."

"I *beg* your pardon," said the stout lady seated next to him in the carriage.

"I'm sorry," said Whiting. "I was talking to myself. A bad habit of mine."

"It is a bad habit," said his fellow passenger severely. She looked at the magazine on Whiting's lap, raised her eyebrows at the picture of the rather more than half-undressed blonde being menaced by something that no self-respecting dinosaur would claim as a close relation.

"What sort of impression does this cover make on you?" asked Whiting.

The stout lady hesitated—it was obvious that she was debating with herself whether or not to appeal to the other passengers for help. She swallowed.

She said, "I think it's rather indecent. I think that trashy publications like that are one of the causes of juvenile delinquency."

"There I don't agree," replied Whiting. "But we'll skip that. What I want to ask you is this—does it arouse any sense of wonder in your br . . . bosom?"

"Yes," she said with conviction. "A strong sense of wonder that a grown man should read such rubbish."

"I not only read it," he admitted, "I write it."

"That," she said, "is worse."

"But it's useful," argued Whiting.

"*Useful?*"

"Yes. After all, it's all propaganda. Sooner or later the taxpayer is going to have to foot a really big bill—the cost of sending the first manned rocket to the Moon. Science fiction is, as it were, softening up the public, selling them the idea . . ."

"But *why?*" she asked. "Why send a rocket to the Moon?"

"Why climb Everest?" he retorted.

"Yes—why?"

"Well," said Whiting carefully. "I suppose it all boils down to this. There will always be people to whom Everest, and the North and South Poles, and the Moon and the planets, will be a challenge. But we're drifting away from the point. I had a talk half an hour or so ago with the editor of this magazine. He was complaining that modern science fiction just doesn't have the same sense of wonder as the old stuff. We couldn't quite decide what the reason for this is. Frankly, I hoped that a new approach to the problem—yours—might be of value."

"Is there such a thing as old science fiction?" asked the stout lady. "I thought that it had sprung up in the years after the war. So I'm afraid that I can't help you. The only advice I can give to you, young man, is to read and write good, *clean* stuff, something of some moral value."

"Stories by, for, and about Boy Scouts," said Whiting.

"Precisely. You will be doing something useful then, helping to combat juvenile delinquency."

"I'll think about it," he said. "Thank you very much, Madam. I get off at this station. Goodnight, and thank you again."

"It was a pleasure," she said, smiling.

The old trout! thought Whiting, as he walked from the station. Still, there was just the chance that she might have been able to bring a fresh viewpoint to the problem. So she didn't. So what?

He looked up at the sky. There's all the wonder you want, Whiting, he thought. Star beyond star, every one of them a sun, and almost every one, if Hoyle is to be believed, with its family of planets. And practically every planet of every star already reached, explored and colonised by some writer—inertialess drives, space warps, and big ships that are almost self-contained worlds making the trip at relatively slow speed with all hands breeding like rabbits so that their great-great-grandchildren can make the landing.

Oh, the wonder's there—but how, *how* to bring it out? As I said in the train—we're all too blase. Readers and writers both. It used to be said that there was nothing new under the sun, now, in our racket, it's got to the stage where there's nothing new under *any* sun. Take myself—in all the years that I've been writing science fiction I've only come up

with one new idea—the mutated rats taking over the spaceship, and then some people said that the story was all too reminiscent of Heinlein's *Universe* and others pointed out that Murray Leinster had mentioned mutated rats in the bilges (and why *should* a spaceship have bilges?) of his interstellar expeditionary ship in *Proxima Centauri*.

He thought, I don't feel like going home just yet. I'll walk on the Heath for a bit, and try to think things out. This sense of wonder business has me a little worried; more than a little, perhaps. How did Kipling put it? *The lamp of our youth shall be utterly out, yet we shall subsist on the smell of it . . .*

It was dark on the Heath, and the wind was cold. Whiting walked slowly along the path, sucking his pipe. Every few minutes he would pause and look up to the dark sky and the glory of the bright stars. He watched an airliner coming in to the airport—winking, coloured lights against the night—and remembered the fascination of Jules Verne's *The Clipper of the Clouds*.

That's the trouble, he thought. Just as flying has become commonplace, in actuality, so has space travel because of all that has been written about it . . . Hello, what's that? An aeroplane without navigation lights? I suppose they know what they're doing—it must be the RAF playing silly beggars. Funny sort of noise their engines have—too quiet for jets, and certainly not propellers . . .

The thing was coming down. Whiting felt the first stirrings of fear. He could not estimate just where the huge, dark shape was going to land, and did not fancy the idea of being underneath it when it did land. He decided that his best policy would be to stand still—if he had to he could always fling himself flat on ground at the last moment. He wished that there was sufficient light for him to be able to make out some details of the strange aircraft—it had not, he was almost sure, conventional wings. Furthermore, it was coming in far too slowly for anything other than a helicopter—and a helicopter it was not.

The thing was down, about fifty yards from where Whiting was standing. It was big—he could make out that much. Metal gleamed faintly in the starlight. Something tinkled faintly, and something else whirred intermittently, and some

thing clanged loudly. Abruptly there was a circle of blue light against the darkness—an opening door?

Whiting walked towards it. Who would emerge from that door? he wondered. Englishmen? Americans? Russians? He supposed that by having witnessed the landing of this obviously experimental craft he would run foul of security. Well, it was up to Security to give the captain of the thing a sharp rap over the knuckles for setting his ship down on public parkland.

There was somebody standing inside the door, his body silhouetted against the blue light. He raised his hand and from the top of the aircraft a spotlight stabbed out, wavered briefly and then found and held Whiting. With half-shut eyes Whiting kept on walking. He would, he decided, make a complaint about the bad manners of those who had shone a searchlight into his eyes.

“Will you come aboard?” asked the man who was standing in the doorway.

What was the accent? wondered Whiting. It was hard to place. It was, he realised, more of an absence of accent than anything else.

The doorway was a few feet above the rough ground, but there was a short ramp leading up to it. Whiting mounted it cautiously, and in spite of his caution, slipped on the smooth metal. The man put out his hand to steady Whiting, pulled him up into the ship.

The writer looked at the stranger—at his uniform first, to try to discover his nationality. But the clothing—a sort of coverall of silver-grey material, with three little golden stars over the left breast—told him nothing.

“Who are you?” asked Whiting, looking at the stranger’s face. “Where are you from?”

And you’re not from Russia, he thought, or from America. That page-boy bob of yours would never be tolerated in the Air Force of either country, to say nothing of the RAF. Odd eyes you have, too—and those pointed ears are rather outre.

“We have returned,” said the man. “We left this world at the time of the Catastrophe . . .”

“But where are you *from*?” asked Whiting.

The man pulled Whiting gently towards the open doorway, pointed to the sky, to Procyon.

"From the fourth planet circling that star," he said. "But forgive me—I must ask *you* questions. We learned your languages on the way here—it is lucky that you have advanced sufficiently to have rediscovered radio. We know, too, that you have flight inside the atmosphere—but have you space flight yet?"

"No," said Whiting.

The man led Whiting inside the ship, to a room that could almost have been a well appointed lounge in a surface ship on Earth's seas. There were others of the crew there, long haired men and women with their hair clipped short. There were bottles and glasses, and a wine that had almost the potency and the flavour of whisky that Whiting found much to his liking. There were cigars—although the leaves from which they had been rolled were not tobacco.

At some stage in the proceedings the ship lifted. Whiting was conducted from the wardroom, along a maze of curving alleyways, to what was obviously the control room. He looked with polite interest at the instruments, at the various pieces of apparatus doing odd things in odd corners. He displayed still more polite interest when the Captain—the man with the three golden stars on the breast of his uniform—touched a switch and the deck of the control room became transparent. Earth lay below them—Earth as he had seen it so many times as illustrations to stories, as coloured plates in factual works on astronautics, in science fiction films.

"Interesting," he said.

"And you say that your race does not have space travel!" cried the Captain. "You're looking at something that no man of your time has ever seen—and all you say is, . . . 'Interesting'!"

"The trouble," said Whiting, "is that I've lost my sense of wonder."

Bertram Chandler

It seems that we are always learning new facts about the star which maintains our various forms of life on Earth. Doubtless the work being done during the International Geophysical Year will produce even more details. This month's article is therefore particularly topical inasmuch as it brings you up-to-date on known facts and theories.

THE SOLAR ATMOSPHERE

By Kenneth Johns

The Sun is one of the most perfect spheres in the Solar System. Examine it carefully with a medium power telescope and good light filters and you will find it impossible to detect any deviation from a true circle.

This perfection of shape is due to the Sun's slow rate of rotation which, unlike the flattened, obese bulk of Jupiter, does not cause an equatorial bulge.

As though drawn with a pair of compasses, the edge of the Sun appears as a sharp limb. In fact, it is not at all sharp and well-defined. You are looking at the photosphere, the boiling surface that is never still and which radiates most of the sunlight that reaches Earth. Above this turbulent surface stretches a tenuous, almost invisible atmosphere, a surrounding shell of gas in which the inner planets are immersed.

Although this atmosphere is, in its higher parts, thinner than the finest vacuum obtainable upon Earth, it is still of paramount importance in determining the Solar structure—and it also poses one of the most mysterious riddles of astronomy. For whilst the Sun's surface is at a mere 6,000 degrees Centigrade, the upper solar atmosphere reaches one million degrees Centigrade.

Even now it has not finally been decided just where the energy for this fantastic temperature arises. Although the core of the Sun is at 13 million degrees Centigrade, the energy from the thermonuclear reactions there has to pass through the cooler surface and, for a long time, scientists were puzzled to explain how a cool surface could be interposed between two hotter layers, assuming that all the energy came from the one side, the interior of the Sun.

When astrophysicists attempted to build up a simple picture of the Sun, theoretical calculations showed that it should have only a very thin atmosphere. At a height of one thousand miles its density should have decreased until it was virtually non-existent.

During solar eclipses, observations can be made which show that these theoretical calculations do not apply in fact. A great rim of atmosphere is seen to surround the Sun and photographs show enormous streamers and a nebulous haze extending outwards for many times the solar radius.

To keep a constant watch on the Sun's atmosphere, astronomers fitted a metal disc in their telescopes and found they could blank out the photospheric disc and observe the lower atmosphere. But, even so, the farthest tenuous gas was so dimly radiating that the general diffraction of light in the Earth's atmosphere was more than enough to swamp it. This difficulty was partially overcome by siting observatories on mountain peaks well above the greater mass of Earth's air.

In this way it was discovered that only the lower part of the solar atmosphere is in a continual state of turbulence resulting in a complete mixing of gases; it is comparable with the first ten miles of the terrestrial air in which there is little if any segregation of gases.

From the surface to a height of 300 miles lies a blanket of cooler gas, at just under 5,000 degrees Centigrade, and at about a tenth of an atmosphere pressure. This relatively calm zone is known as the reversing layer since it is here that

the Fraunhofer lines found in the solar spectrum originate. The bright light from the hotter photosphere is filtered by the cooler gases, each type of atom abstracting the particular wavelengths of light that can be absorbed by its orbiting electrons, leaving gaps in the spectrum from the surface beneath.

From the photosphere to a height of 9,000 miles lies the chromosphere. This may be seen during an eclipse of the Sun as a magnificent deep red ring around the Sun. The density of gas within it falls off to under a millionth of a millionth of an atmosphere at the top and the temperature climbs to 35,000 degrees Centigrade.

Beyond the chromosphere, extending outwards for millions of miles, lies the corona—the strange light that bursts outwards from the Sun during an eclipse, eliciting a gasp of surprised awe and seeming to show a new facet to our primary. Some astronomers even assert that it stretches to Earth, where we see it as the zodiacal light, particularly bright near the horizon in the ecliptic plane of the Solar System. Although the corona is so tenuous as to compare in density with interstellar gas clouds, spectroscopic measurements during total eclipses show it to be at one million degrees Centigrade.

Luckily this enormous temperature is in such a thin gas and is really the result of the fantastically high speeds—about one million miles an hour—of the gas particles in that region. If the upper solar atmosphere was radiating as a solid surface at one million degrees Centigrade, the whole of the Solar System would have vapourised long ago.

The mysterious lines of the spectrum found in connection with the corona were explained as being caused by 'Coronium.' It was not until 1940 that these lines were found to be due to highly ionised iron, calcium and nickel; their atoms so stripped of their electrons that the temperatures there must be of the order of a million degrees Centigrade.

Much of the radiation from the corona is in the energy-rich ultraviolet and X-ray bands of the spectrum. These are absorbed by Earth's atmosphere and were only recently measured by means of spectroscopes carried aloft by American rockets.

Further progress on measurement has been made even on the Lyot coronagraph, the disc to blanket out the central photosphere, used at high-altitude observatories. During the

1954 solar eclipse an aircraft flying six miles above the Earth carried observers and equipment too heavy for rockets above the densest blanket of air. Resulting plates showed that the solar corona extended out to at least fifty-four solar radii.

The shape of the corona is closely related to the eleven-year sunspot cycle. Two years before a sunspot maximum the corona is almost circular, showing twenty or so flame-like petals around the whole disc. However, two years before a sunspot minimum the corona consists mainly of a few pearly white petals extending only from the equator.

Like the rest of the Universe, there are connections and rules of conduct that control the apparently contradictory motions and relations of the Sun and the Solar System. Discovering just what these are is one of the main functions of the astrophysicist.

There are three main theories as to the cause of the structure and the fantastically high temperatures found in the upper solar atmosphere.

The first looks to the strong magnetic fields known to exist on the Sun, particularly connected with sunspots. Hydrodynamic electromagnetic waves from the Sun are said to be able to excite the upper gas, speeding up the ions until they are, in effect, high speed particles. In this way, the petals of the corona may be thought of as being composed of high speed electrons and particles emitted by the Sun and bent along magnetic lines of force. Against this theory, it is known that there is no variation of the temperature and total size of the Sun's atmosphere in accordance with the 11-year Solar cycle of activity, whilst the magnetic fields certainly do vary.

Second: some astronomers believe that the boiling surface of the Sun creates sound waves, just as a kettle does when boiling. But our kettle here is three-quarters of a million miles in diameter and the intensity of sound produced is such that it creates shock waves in the corona. These pass on energy to the atoms, ionising and speeding them up. In contradiction to this, there is as yet no evidence of intense sound or shock waves or a temperature rise in the first one thousand miles of the solar atmosphere, which would of necessity have to be traversed by the wave fronts.

If this hypothesis holds up that long, we may see the first probe rockets reaching out into the glare of the sun equipped

with outside microphone pickups and be able to listen in to the Sun boiling.

The third theory, strongly supported by astronomers Hoyle and Lyttleton, is the infall theory. Here, the suggestion is that the energy of the solar atmosphere comes, not from within, but from outside the Sun. The energy comes from interstellar gas trapped by the Sun's gravity.

Falling inwards with an acceleration rising to twenty-eight G, atoms from outer space gain more and more speed the further they fall. Attracted inwards from a tunnel extending out to the orbit of Saturn, they are travelling at four hundred miles a second when they reach the deeper solar atmosphere. They follow the Sun's lines of magnetic force and create the delicate tracteries of the corona and, still sweeping inwards, collide with the denser atmosphere to create a 'splash' region of high temperature.

Some astronomers even suggest that it is magnetic disturbances from the infalling gases which *create* the violent variations in the solar magnetic field that make up the eleven-year solar cycle, pointing out that Jupiter has an orbit time of 11.8 years and that Jupiter's mass may be sufficient to divert part of the infalling gas.

An interesting explanation of another mystery may then be worked out. The absence of sunspots between the years 1640 and 1716 would come about because the Sun during that period was moving from one interstellar gas cloud to another which it penetrated after an interval of 76 years.

Whilst many of the currently baffling mysteries of the planets may well be cleared up when we set foot upon their surfaces or their nearest satellites; the Sun presents problems peculiarly his own when it comes to relying upon space travel for a solution to his mysteries.

Long range astronomy in connection with the Sun will still apply even when we have conquered space.

Kenneth Johns

Dawson of Earth and Arvan of Luther II have been crossing galactic swords throughout a number of stories during the past two years, usually with the Earthman winning the gambit. In this final story it is "checkmate"—but who wins the game is for you to decide.

MATE IN ONE

By Lan Wright

Johnny Dawson was en route from Beta Auriga to Earth when Hendrix' imperative command reached him. The triple-X security message was handed him by the ship's captain in the middle of the night watch and Dawson scowled irritably and rubbed a hand through his blonde hair as he read the decoded message.

'PROCEED LUTHER TWO. INVESTIGATE AND REPORT. TAKE NO REPEAT NO ACTION . . . HENDRIX . . . SPACE COMM.'

Dawson cursed again, out loud this time. "Always it's Luther," he growled to Stevens, the ship's captain. "How can I trans-ship?"

Stevens frowned. "Well, we're just under a light-year from Algol. I could divert, but it'll cost us about four days if I do."

"Space Commission orders," Dawson told. "Shall I be able to pick up a ship for Luther from there?"

"I wouldn't know. If there's no regular routing due through there you might charter a private vessel. It'll cost the Earth—"

"I shan't be paying," snapped Dawson. "All right. Algol it is."

"I can send a sub-space message ahead," Stevens suggested.

Dawson brooded. To do that Stevens would have to give his name and designation of authority, and he didn't know just what degree of security Hendrix placed on the matter. The triple-X on the paper in his hand decided.

"Best not. I'll take my chance when I get there. I suppose there will be a Terran governor?"

"I'll check and let you know at breakfast," promised Stevens.

Dawson relaxed in his bunk after the captain left, and cursed Hendrix and the Space Commission in a low, angry monotone. His job on the lone planet of Beta Auriga had been a nice easy one straightening out a trading dispute, and it had been completed in half the anticipated time. There had been the prospect of a long and pleasant vacation when he reached Earth; in fact, he had even got as far as planning which of his many female acquaintances he should invite to visit the Venusian Riviera with him. And now—!

He read the crumpled message form again. Of course, it had to be Luther. Every time he had to deal with the Lutherians there was trouble, and he bitterly regretted the reputation he had built up as 'Lutherian specialist.' His uneasy friendship with Arvan, a high Lutheran official was another factor in the game. Arvan, in his turn had been labelled as a Terran specialist and Dawson didn't doubt for a moment that when he arrived on Luther Two, Arvan would be waiting for him.

He wondered gloomily if he dare ignore the command, bribe Stevens, cook the books and turn up on Earth as if nothing had happened. And then he thought of Hendrix, big and round, tough and wily, seated in his office with the ever present cigar jutting dangerously from between his pudgy lips. He shuddered slightly and decided he would rather go to Luther.

The landing on Algol Three was uneventful, and Dawson spent his first three hours on the planet at the spaceport trying to arrange a passage to Luther. It took him an hour to discover that there would be no trade or passenger ships through for at least two weeks Terran time, and then it was doubtful if he could get a direct trip to Luther. Private charter was too out of the question.

In the thin, cold air of the semi-arctic planet he went from office to office, and his temper became shorter and shorter as his efforts proved unfruitful. Finally, in desperation, he took a ground car to the Central Administration Office where the Terran governor had his quarters.

The thin, pale-faced male secretary in the outer office eyed him superciliously and shook his head with disinterested finality as Dawson asked to see the Governor.

"Requests for an audience have to be submitted at least three days in advance and in writing. I'm sorry—"

"You'll be a damned sight sorrier if I'm not inside that office in two minutes," snarled Dawson, slamming his credentials on the desk. "Just say Hendrix, Space Commission, to the Governor and he'll be out here kicking you round the office."

The secretary's face blanched as he saw the red and gold identity card with its distinctive badge, and he vanished into the inner office with a frightened, apologetic mumble. A bare minute later he was back to hold open the door and usher Dawson inside.

A slim, grey-haired man, well groomed but with a tired, lined face rose to greet him. "Mister Dawson? My name is Harmon."

They shook hands and Dawson sat down in the chair beside the governor's desk.

"What can I do for you, Mister Dawson?"

"I've been at the spaceport for the past three hours trying to raise a passage to Luther Two, and—"

"Luther Two?" The surprise in Harmon's voice was obvious. "Then there is trouble?"

"Trouble?" Dawson's eyes narrowed. "What do you know about it?"

"Precious little. Rumours, that's all. But if you're going there I assumed—" Harmon shrugged wordlessly.

Dawson handed over the message sheet containing Hendrix' orders.

"All I know is written on that sheet of paper. I want a ship, a fast ship—and I want it now."

Harmon nodded.

"Now tell me your rumours."

"Well—" The governor twiddled awkwardly with a stylo-pen and studied the desk top before him. "As I say, I've had only a few unconfirmed reports. There's been a lot of trouble lately between the Lutherians and the Talliti—"

"The who?" broke in Dawson.

"Talliti. They're natives of the Lyra Group—a minor sun called Tallitus."

"That's a new one on me," growled Dawson.

"They're not terribly well known. Until the last year or so they kept themselves to themselves. They joined the Galactic Union, but they didn't take any active part in it. They put nothing in and they took nothing out. Being a fringe star as well didn't help to advertise them."

"How come you know so much about them?"

"I've been studying up on them since the bother with the Lutherians started."

"What sort of trouble?"

Harmon's grey eyes turned coldly on Dawson. "Trouble like—war," he stated bleakly.

The flight to Luther Two took just nineteen days in the fast cruiser scout which Harmon provided, and Dawson spent the trip brooding over the trouble that awaited his arrival. The governor hadn't been able to help him very much about the general outline of the situation. There had been small incidents between the Talliti and the Lutherians for almost three years. None of them had been serious in itself; there had been trading problems, territory violations, squabbles over barren pieces of useless rock. Each incident in itself a pin-prick, and each pin-prick adding to a large running sore. Now? There was no definite news. The Lutherians were silent and so were the Talliti.

Harmon had been apologetic. He was, he pointed out, a long way from the scene of the disturbance, and his only sources of news and information were from unofficial quarters, traders, ship crews, and others. The only definite fact to emerge was that war had raised its ugly head in the Galaxy for the first time in over a hundred Terran years.

And Dawson was walking right into the middle of it.

By the time he reached Luther Two he was worried, angry, and as jumpy as a cat. The crew of the scout had kept out of his way, and he was glad of the solitude even though he could do nothing save think and worry. It was almost a relief when they landed at the planet's main spaceport for the vacuum of inaction was about to be filled, and even if he couldn't foresee what lay ahead, at least he would be doing something.

The difference in the spaceport and its surroundings since his last visit was startling. The low, one-storied buildings, square and box-like in their structure, were as he remembered them, but the easy, peaceful routine of a trading station was gone. There was, instead, the organised hustle and authority of a military base. Sleek war vessels lay in ranks around the field perimeter, their dull black hulls in sweeping contrast to the gleaming body of the Terran scout. Instead of civil personnel the grey uniforms of the Lutheran military were everywhere.

Dawson's first sight of the field as he left the scout told him that the rumours were true.

A group of three Lutheran officers in a low, squat ground car swept rapidly across the field from the low bulk of the Central Control building. Dawson waited for them patiently as they got out of the car and strutted on their short legs across the intervening yards to the scout. They halted before him and saluted stiffly, Lutheran style; Dawson acknowledged them gravely, taking in the round, pudgy forms with the moon faces and the dark, luminous eyes.

"Mister Dawson?" The leader of the trio spoke English with a heavily accented voice and a lack of expression that showed he was no linguistic expert.

Dawson nodded. "I am."

"We having heard of your coming are asked to conduct your presence to that of Arvan, Lutheran military plenipotentiary now who awaits your coming."

Dawson struggled to repress a smile as he sorted the jumble of badly pronounced words one from another.

"I shall be happy to meet Arvan," he replied, and crossed to the ground car as the leader motioned him to do so.

The Administration building was as he remembered it from his last visit over three years earlier. Only the occupants had changed. On that previous occasion only a few dispirited civilians caught up in the blight of disease occupied the place. Now it was a hive of activity, and everywhere he saw the grey uniforms of the military. The three officers escorted him along a familiar corridor, and he smiled to himself as he realised that Arvan had taken possession of the same office that he had occupied on that previous occasion, so long ago.

As he ducked his head to go through the door Dawson felt familiar claustrophobia of low ceilings and lower doors

which emphasised the disparity in height between the two races. The short, rotund form of Arvan turned from a window as he entered, and they stood for a moment without speaking, each sizing up the other with all the wariness of old opponents who admire and respect the other's ability.

"I knew you would be coming, Mister Dawson," Arvan said at last in his stilted, alien English.

Dawson chuckled. "And I knew you would be waiting for me, Arvan."

"Please, sit down."

Dawson made himself as comfortable as he could in the low chair beside the desk. Lutheran furniture, while admirably suited to that race's form, was cramped and uncomfortable for the taller, slimmer Terran build.

The Lutheran's large, round eyes studied him with unwinking steadiness for several seconds, and then he asked, "You have come from Earth alone?"

Dawson shook his head. "No, I haven't come from Earth. I was on my way there when I was diverted here on orders from the Space Commission. I'm alone except for the crew of the scout which brought me."

"There are no other ships expected?"

"No." The surprise in Dawson's voice echoed that which was in his mind.

"I see." Arvan seemed suddenly shrunken in his seat as if the despair of some fact not known to Dawson had made itself felt upon his whole mind and body. Dawson, for his part, was utterly bewildered. He was lost for words, and Arvan's question didn't make sense. Why should he not be alone? Why—?

"Arvan," he snapped, as sudden realisation came to him, "have you been in touch with Earth asking them for military aid against the Talliti? Were you hoping that other ships would be coming?"

The Lutheran's bleak eyes turned on him as he nodded. "Yes, we sent an urgent request to Earth about forty of your days ago, asking for assistance against the invading Talliti. We had no reply until twenty days ago, and that merely stated that a Terran representative was on his way here. That was all. We hoped—" Arvan shrugged, an oddly human gesture.

"Do I understand from all this that you're losing the war with the Talliti?" asked Dawson.

"Yes."

"But, dammit, Arvan, you can hardly expect Earth to come barging in on a squabble like this without knowing what it's all about. Stars only knows what sort of trouble that would start. All I know—and I expect all the Space Commission knows—is that a series of incidents over a period of years have now flared into open hostility. We don't even know who is right and who is wrong. For all we know it may be six of one and half a dozen of the other, and if we took sides on those terms then other races might start taking sides." He paused and eyed Arvan grimly. "Can you see where that would lead us?"

"Yes, I see it," agreed Arvan with a tired gesture. "But there are several things you do not know. The Talliti have been planning this for almost ten Galactic decades—about fifty of your years. Ever since they came into the Galactic Union they have been drawing on the knowledge and resources of other races without contributing one particle of knowledge or material value themselves. The rest of the Galactic Union hasn't known what was going on because the Talliti kept to themselves. Travellers were not made welcome, and the only people who have had any contact with them have been ourselves, and that because we border on their region of space. We are their nearest neighbours."

Dawson stirred uneasily. "What's all this leading to, Arvan? Are you trying to whitewash your own misdeeds?"

The Lutheran eyed him reproachfully. "You should know me better than that. Some two years ago the Talliti started to leave their own system. They landed on unpeopled worlds within our area of space and started what I think you would call frontier incidents. There was trouble over trading arrangements, they accused us of sending them inferior goods, and they paid in short weight of their own exports, minerals, a few chemicals. When we protested they accused us of attempting to stir up trouble."

Arvan paused, and his gaze came to rest steadily and imploringly on Dawson. "What I tell you now is the truth, Dawson. About one hundred of your days ago one of our trade ships got off course on a trip to the main planet of Tallitus—the home world of the Talliti. There was some trouble over navigational instruments—I do not know the

details. While trying to re-orientate themselves the crew took their vessel close to the fourth planet of Tallitus, a barren world. As they passed some ten million miles away they spotted a great fleet of ships manoeuvring around the planet. How many ships there were they could not tell at that range for their plotting instruments were not selective enough. They made a run for home, and were at once pursued." Arvan paused again and looked sadly out of the low, round window. "Before they were destroyed they managed to send off a message giving details of what they had seen. Three days later the Talliti declared war on us for violation of their territory."

Dead silence blanketed the room as the Lutheran stopped speaking. Dawson sat hunched in the low chair grimly aware that in his worst dreams he had not envisaged such a chaotic mess as this. If Arvan were speaking the truth, and he had no reason at present to doubt it, then the Talliti represented a threat to the entire Galaxy. There could be no other answer to it—and if the Lutherians were the first to feel the axe then Earth might not be long in following.

"Why not inform the Galactic Union?" he asked abruptly.

"It would be our word against that of the Talliti. We are both members of the Union, and the Council would feel bound to listen to both sides, and by that time—" he paused.

"The Talliti would have won," finished Dawson. He nodded. "But why try and drag Earth into it?"

"Earth is the strongest of the individual races in the Union, and your race has always shown a strong dislike of other races who tried to steal a march upon them which would endanger that position."

Dawson smiled wryly. He knew that Arvan was referring to their previous encounter. It was true, as Arvan said, that the Space Commission let nothing go by the board that might be against the interests of Earth and her Empire.

"War is another thing altogether, Arvan," he remarked gently. "No race can take a chance on war with all that it entails."

"Then what is the purpose of your visit?" asked Arvan bitterly.

"To see, to investigate, to report, but not—repeat not—to take any action."

"You need investigate one fact only," replied Arvan. "Luther is losing the war—will lose the war, and we are onl

the first step which the Talliti intend to take." The great, round, luminous eyes fixed coldly on Dawson. "Earth may well be the last, Mister Dawson."

Dawson spent five days examining the Lutheran position. Arvan, despite his preliminary disappointment, did all he could to assist him. By the time his preliminary investigation was over Dawson doubted if even Arvan knew as much about his race's position as he did himself.

It was clear from reports of the active encounters with the Talliti that they had ships and forces which were not greatly superior to those the Lutherians had. But those forces moved with a precision and a timing which was nothing short of uncanny. Every action and every battle seemed to be planned down to the last detail, and every encounter resulted in one end only—the defeat of the Lutherians. For all that they were invariably victorious the Talliti showed no inclination to hurry their conquest. They moved with the slow deliberation of pieces on a chess board, and every move had as its base a succession of previous successful moves.

Looking over the battle plans of the Lutherians Dawson had the feeling that there was something lacking, some piece of information that he didn't have. No military plan could be conceived and meet with such continuous success unless there was at the back of it something more than just military planning. Try as they might the Lutherians could do nothing to stop the slow, inexorable march of the Talliti fleets and forces. They tried lures, ambushes and stratagems of all descriptions; they tried individual ship to ship combat and fleet attacks; they tried feints and parries—and, in more than one instance, the desperation of suicide attacks.

And all had failed.

As he relaxed in his cabin aboard the Terran scout at the end of his fifth day on Luther, Dawson felt a coldness within him that he had never experienced before. There was in the Talliti advance an unshaken, unswerving purposefulness that was frightening. The Galaxy's experience of war was historical not actual, there had been no war in the Galaxy for well over a hundred Terran years, and in that time individuals had died who belonged to many races. No one, now, had any actual experience of war—no one wanted it, until the Talliti came.

Dawson had no doubt of the truth of all that Arvan had told him. The sincerity of the Lutheran cause was overwhelmingly clear. All the facts added up to a master plan for stirring up trouble so that the Talliti had some excuse for attacking Luther. Had the stray Lutheran ship not stumbled on their secret fleet concentrations that attack might have been postponed for a year, several years, a decade maybe, but it would have come sometime, of that Dawson was convinced.

He reached for the intercom set beside his bunk and called the ship's captain.

"Randall? Dawson here. Can you fix me up with a Terran call, sight and sound, with a security scramble?"

"Can do," replied Randall. "Who do you want?"

"Hendrix, Space Commission."

"I'll call you when it's made."

Dawson lay back and tried to think what he could tell Hendrix that would convince the Commission of the seriousness of the situation. He could produce no proof beyond what the Lutherians had told him, there was nothing concrete save his own observations and his own conclusions. Knowing Hendrix he doubted that it would be enough. To appreciate the full enormity of the Talliti action you had to be on the spot—and Hendrix was half the Galaxy away.

The call came through an hour later, and Dawson went along to the ship's communication centre to find Hendrix face steady upon the tiny, grey screen.

"Hi, boss."

Hendrix grunted. "You got me out of a meeting, Dawson. It's not a thing the Commission likes."

"High living. You should be out here, there's all hell let loose."

"There'll be hell let loose here if I don't get back in there soon."

"Got around to the Lutheran business yet?" asked Dawson

"We're on it now. We've had reports through unofficial channels that they're taking a beating."

Dawson nodded grimly. "It's my guess we've got a bid for Galactic conquest on our hands out here. Unless something is done pretty quickly there isn't going to be a Lutheran race in a few months time. These Talliti are tough boys, and they fixed things good right from the start."

"Rumours," sneered Hendrix. "You've got a frontier dispute on your hands. Anyway what do you expect us to do? We can't get involved without bringing other races into it. This is just a minor squabble, it'll fizzle out if we leave it be. We only sent you because we wanted someone on the spot to report. Anyway, we can't risk anything that will involve other races."

"I'm reporting now," snapped Dawson angrily. "What happens if the Lutherians go under?"

Hendrix stared bleakly from the small screen. "It'll be too bad. They shouldn't have got themselves in trouble."

Dawson felt the coldness within him grow more intense. This was what he had feared and this was what he had got.

"I wish you were out here, chief, you and the whole Commission. There's something boiling up here that could take in the whole Galaxy in a few years. I've done what you asked, investigated and reported." He leaned forward in his seat and said urgently, "This is only the first step, Hendrix, of that I'm convinced, and our turn will come somewhere along the line. Tell the Commission that and see how they like it. Tell them to send a fleet out here and to hell with upsetting other races. That's the only way to handle this thing, believe me."

The cigar in Hendrix mouth jiggled angrily. "Once and for all, Dawson, the Commission isn't justified in getting itself involved. Why the devil don't the Lutherians go to the Galactic Union if they think they're in the right? We'll back them up in the conference room, but we can't enter hostilities and risk a spread of this flare up."

"By the time the Union get through talking there won't be a Lutheran race to back up," Dawson retorted bitterly. "We've got an ambitious race here that—"

The rest of his sentence was lost in the shallow cackle of laughter that echoed from the speaker as Hendrix chuckled. "You've been reading too many comic books lately, Dawson."

Dawson didn't wait for the rest of Hendrix sarcasm to reach him. White with anger he snapped off the set and stormed from the cabin. In the corridor he met Randall, and the captain eyed him quizzically as he noted the rage and emotion on Dawson's face.

"Trouble?" he enquired gently.

Dawson swore luridly. "Those—" he spluttered. "Listen, Randall, get in touch with Arvan and arrange with us to fly with the next Lutheran fleet to leave for the war area. Stress that we're going along strictly as observers, and that we want to take a pictorial record of anything and everything for transmission to Earth. Maybe that'll shake them up a bit."

"Won't that be endangering the ship?"

Dawson shook his head. "No, we'll keep out of the actual combat area, and take filmed reports from ships which are actually involved—if that can be arranged. Explain to Arvan that I want to send a redhot report back to Earth for study by the Space Commission. It might help change their minds and get them to take some action."

Randall eyed him glumly. "Even if it does," he said, "they couldn't get a fleet out here in time to do any good."

"The mere threat might be enough to stave off the utter defeat of the Lutherians," replied Dawson, "and that would be enough for the time being."

Randall nodded and went about his mission. He came back so quickly that Dawson read refusal in his return even before he shook his head and said, "Arvan won't play. If you want to go along in a Lutheran ship, all right. But he won't risk the Talliti spotting a Terran vessel even at that distance."

Dawson pursed his lips. There was nothing to be done, and in his heart he didn't blame Arvan. The Lutherians were taking a big enough beating without giving the Talliti further reasons for stepping up their onslaught. There was, of course, the risk of capture or death if he went in a Lutheran ship, and that wouldn't please the Space Commission. Still . . .

"All right," he replied. "When do I leave?"

"Two days," Randall told him. "Arvan will go with you if you decide to make the trip under his conditions."

"Tell him, yes. I'll go."

The fleet which Dawson joined was a reinforcement group for the hard-pressed Lutheran forces striving to hold a battle line on the outer fringes of their own system. From the battle plans which he had been shown Dawson could see that there was no question of a Lutheran invasion of Tallitus. There never had been. The battle line spread itself crab-like across space a good six light-years from the fringe of the Tallitus system, and an advance of a few million miles would bring

the invaders within striking distance of the Lutherians home world.

The trip out in company with the fleet took slightly less than a week Terran time, and Dawson spent most of the time alone. Arvan had a multitude of administrative detail to attend to, and there was no other Terran-speaking Lutheran in the crew. This, added to the build of the vessel, made the journey anything but pleasant. His quarters were probably luxurious to a Lutheran, but to Dawson they were cramped and awkward, and the lighting, with its cold, blue glare, was not exactly suited to, or restful for, his eyes.

Late on the sixth day of the journey Arvan called him up to the bridge control. The change in tone of the vessel's engines told Dawson that the speed of the ship had been cut, and he guessed, correctly, that the fleet had arrived in the rear of the battle area. Arvan pointed wordlessly to the great, silver expanse of the plot control screen as it spread itself across one wall of the bridge. On the screen an ever shifting, glowing pattern of red and gold told its own story. Tiny specks, each no bigger than a pin's head, lay in uncountable array, each moved with a slow precision as if it had life of its own so that the whole screen seemed to be a writhing mass that undulated gently in kaleidoscopic chaos.

Even as he watched Dawson imagined that the red dots shifted and gave ground a little as the pattern of battle ebbed and flowed and was reflected on the screen.

Arvan nodded beside him. "Yes, Mister Dawson, the red is our colour, the gold is the enemy. They have advanced continuously since we left Luther and our losses grow larger as time passes." The round, eyes rested impassively on Dawson's face. "I could arrange for a direct and secret transmission to Earth if you wish."

Dawson read the message in the Lutheran's unemotional voice. The Lutheran position must have worsened considerably in the past few days, and Arvan was making a last, desperate bid for Terran aid.

Sadly, he shook his head. "It would do no good, Arvan."

The Lutheran turned wordlessly away. Long seconds later he said, coldly, "I am transferring to the battle headquarters of our Central Command. No doubt you will wish to go with me. This ship and its companions will go straight into battle."

Dawson managed an uncomfortable, "Thank you," and then found himself ignored.

An hour later they were transferred by a small ferry craft to the giant vessel that was the Central Command H.Q. of the Lutheran battle fleet. Only on a few previous occasions had Dawson seen a bigger spaceship than the one which loomed through the view port of the ferry as they approached. It bulked against the stars, blotting out a vast section of space, and around lay smaller craft, cruiser scouts, ferry ships, supply vessels, and all the impedimenta of a war fleet.

Arvan was taken straight to a wide, high room deep in the bowels of the ship and Dawson went with him. It was easily the largest Lutheran room he had ever seen, and from the quiet bustle around him as he entered Dawson knew that here, in this one room was the centre of Lutheran strategy. There were plotting screens, tri-di maps, computers, communicators, and a score of others that he could not recognise, all of them manned by upwards of a hundred Lutherians. Here and there the bright uniform markings of high-ranking officers showed where section chiefs sat in control of their own small empires of power.

From a desk set on a dais above the level of the rest of the room a high-ranking officer stepped down as they entered. From the facings on his uniform it was clear that he was high in the Lutheran military hierarchy. Arvan greeted him with some deference, and they spoke together for several moments in the odd, fluid tones of their native tongues. Several times the eyes of the officer flicked to Dawson and it was clear that he was being discussed. As always the unemotional facial control was such that Dawson couldn't tell whether the references were favourable or otherwise. He guessed otherwise.

At last Arvan turned to him and said, "This is Talba, High Commander of the Battle Fleet."

Dawson bowed slightly but said nothing.

"I have told him that we can expect no assistance from Earth, and he says that there is little hope that we shall be able to resist the Talliti for much longer than six Galactic periods."

Dawson felt a cold knot settle in his stomach. Six periods was about fifteen Terran weeks.

"By then," Arvan continued bleakly, "the fight will be well inside our home system. We shall be forced to surrender to avoid the slaughter of our civilian population." The cold eyes settled on Dawson, drawing his gaze like a magnet. "What will you tell your superiors then, Mister Dawson?"

Twice in the days that followed the great H.Q. vessel and its attendant flotilla had to withdraw, and move a little nearer to the outer fringes of the home system. Each time Dawson felt the gloom and desperation deepen around him.

He studied at first hand the war and its conduct, the movements of the fleets, the strategy of the Lutherians—everything and anything—in an attempt to find out why the Talliti were winning. The answers were the same as those he had gained on the planet Luther; there was no reason, except what appeared to be fantastic, overwhelming luck. And that he dismissed as ridiculous.

“I don’t understand it,” he told Arvan at one of their too brief meetings. “I’m no military expert, but even I can see that such things just can’t keep on happening, not unless we’re dealing with a race of military geniuses.”

“Can you imagine what will happen when they take on the rest of the Galaxy?” asked Arvan.

“You think they’ll try it?”

“In time—yes. Success breeds success, as I believe your race has stated. Ambition is an insatiable beast that only death can curb. The whole manoeuvre against us showed that it was carefully thought out and executed on the basis of a long term plan. And if they will plan for us—” the black eyes were sombre, “—well, they could plan for you and for others.”

There was a long silence while the Lutheran let the significance of his remark sink in.

“I do not think you or I will live to see it, Mister Dawson, but in a few decades—two centuries, perhaps—Earth will be in the position we are in now. And where will she turn for help when that day comes?”

Dawson knew that Arvan was right, yet there was nothing he could say or do. Abruptly, he asked, “When can we go back to Luther?”

“Whenever you wish,” said Arvan. “Is the outlook here so disturbing?”

“I’m doing nothing here. I’ve looked at records and maps and plans until I’m cross-eyed. There is no reasonable conclusion I can come to. I’m beginning to think that if Earth did intervene it’d make no difference whatever to the outcome.” There was dead silence as the import of his words rang through the room. He hit his right fist into his left palm with a sudden gesture of disgust, and cursed fluidly. “There’s

a random factor somewhere, Arvan, there has to be. Something is causing this whole wretched mess, and I can't believe that it is just a matter of good or bad luck, nothing works that way. There's a reason somewhere, and until we find it—"

"There is no hope," finished Arvan.

Dawson shook his head. "That's one thing there always is."

Arvan arranged for the return trip to Luther, and together, the next day, they crossed from the giant H.Q. ship to a cruiser scout through a connecting chamber. They made their way along the low corridors towards the bridge control, and as they did so they passed another lock. As they approached it Dawson could see groups of armed Lutherians marshalling a string of alien creatures from the H.Q. ship to the scout.

They were tall, slim, reptilian beings, with cold, lidless eyes, and a scaly, reddish skin. Their hands were four fingered, each finger ending in a blunt, wicked talon. The overall picture was one of obsidian evil, and was completed by a short, prehensile tail that waved oddly as the creatures walked. They were uniformed, unarmed and manacled.

"Talliti," remarked Dawson without bothering to make a question of the statement.

"Prisoners," agreed Arvan. "There are always some to be taken back to Luther."

"Do you take many?"

"A few thousands only. They come in small groups from captured or damaged ships. We hold them as hostages against the future."

Dawson stood aside and watched the shuffling prison chain go past. The Talliti were coldly, bleakly unemotional in much the same way as the Lutherians. They gave the impression that imprisonment was a minor mishap that would be put right before very long. There was a scorn of their captors which showed their confidence, and Dawson had to admit that they had reason for it. He shrugged and followed Arvan to the bridge.

"So that's the enemy," he remarked, as Arvan slid the bridge door closed behind them. "Ugly looking lot. Have you got much out of them from questioning?"

"Nothing, they do not volunteer information very easily."

Dawson looked at him in surprise. "Not even under the influence of drugs?"

"We do not use such methods on prisoners," Arvan told him.

"What?" Dawson was flabbergasted. "You've been picking up prisoners by the hundred ever since this thing started, and you've not even bothered to question them properly?"

"It would not be—I think you say—ethical."

"Ethical!" shouted Dawson. "Whose talking about ethics? Look, Arvan, the Talliti are winning a war because they have something that you haven't. Do you know how they're treating their prisoners? I bet my head you don't. Under the circumstances you can't afford kid gloves. Get your chemists working on their basic metabolism and find out what will make them talk, otherwise I'm no good to you and neither is anyone else. We might just as well sit back and watch the slaughter to its end."

There was a long, strained silence, before Arvan remarked, "That is how your race would do it, Mister Dawson. That is why—"

"That's why we've got where we have, Arvan," snapped Dawson brutally. "We may not be the nicest people in the Galaxy, but, by heavens, we're the strongest."

"I do not—"

"You didn't hesitate to use drugs on me back on Corval Two."

"For that you volunteered."

Dawson waved the comment aside with a gesture of disgust. "It's no good you shouting for help from Earth unless you've done every possible thing to fight your own battles. If we came in we'd use methods you wouldn't like—but you'd accept them—or else. Think about it before we reach Luther otherwise I might as well go Earthside as soon as we arrive."

Dawson turned and stormed from the bridge.

Two days before they reached Luther Arvan came to his cabin and told him that the Central Council had agreed to follow his suggestion.

When they landed Dawson went gloomily to the Terran scout to await events. It was clear that Arvan did not approve of the action towards the Talliti prisoners, and it was equally clear that the Lutheran Central Council shared his disapproval. Only the imminence of defeat overcame their scruples.

Randall, the scout ship captain, met him as he boarded the vessel, and his eyebrows were raised questioningly as they exchanged brief greetings.

Dawson shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "Not one damned thing. I've seen a space war—at a distance. I've seen a few Talliti prisoners—at close range. Beyond that, nothing." He rubbed a hand wearily across the back of his neck. "One thing's for sure, the Lutherians are losing a war that should at least be partially in their favour without any real reason that I can see. When Arvan tells me it will be Earth's turn in a few decades," he shrugged, "well, I believe him—that's the way things are. The Talliti aren't playing, this is for keeps. Anything new here?"

"Not much," replied Randall. "Hendrix called from Earth."

"Hendrix? When? What did he want?"

Randall grinned sardonically. "Four days ago. Told me to keep an eye on you. Seems you've got a reputation with the Space Commission, and this is one spot where they don't want you causing any trouble."

"Trouble," laughed Dawson scornfully. "The double-dyed space-rat. That's Hendrix all right—play both ends against the middle."

"Don't tell him I told you."

Dawson waved the idea aside. "Forget it. I can't do much right now, at least until I've heard from Arvan. That might be some time."

Actually it was five days, and when he came to see Dawson Arvan's haunted eyes and grim face told of futile success.

"We know the reason for our defeat," he told Dawson "but it does us no good. It merely hastens our defeat."

"So you're losing a war that was lost already," snapped Dawson. "At least you're no worse off."

"The Talliti are using a giant mechanical brain. I do not know the technical name. It is based on stored information, and has the ability to compute future actions from Current data. It—"

"Is that all?" Dawson's voice was high with surprise. "An electronic brain. Dammit, Arvan, Earth has had them for centuries—"

"And so have we, but the knowledge does us no good."

"Why the devil not?"

"We, too, have had computers for many decades. They are not new. We use them for industrial work and for scientific research. But the one which the Talliti are using is a city in itself, with hundreds of scientists and thousands of technicians to keep it supplied with information and to feed it the problems of war." He gestured weakly. "It is the ultimate machine for it is in direct contact with the battle area, and can decide in seconds what action should be taken by the Talliti forces."

"Then get your own computer. Fight them at their own game."

Arvan smiled humourlessly. "The Talliti have been preparing for this war for years. We have not the time or the resources."

When the Lutheran had left him Dawson stayed in his cabin, staring moodily at the deck between his feet. What an unholy mess it all was! He recalled his previous encounters with the Lutherians. They hadn't been pleasant for there had been trickery and double-dealing on both sides, but through it all he had come to a reluctant admiration for the moon-faced, round-eyed people. He could hardly call Arvan a friend. People of different races could not be that close, their outlooks were too varied, their interests too different. Nevertheless, he had to admit to some emotion when he thought of Arvan, for in a sad, wistful way he would miss his contact with the Lutheran. Arvan had an integrity which many of Dawson's own race could do well to emulate—not least of all, Dawson himself.

There was a knock on the cabin door, and he roused himself to call, "Come in."

Randall entered, and asked with forced casualness. "Any luck? I heard that Arvan called."

Dawson laughed sarcastically. "Oh, sure. The answer was right there under our noses all the time. The Talliti are doing something that we thought of centuries ago—they're using a giant mechanical brain." He told Randall the rest of what Arvan had said.

When he'd finished Randall remarked, "Well, that solves one problem. At least Earth won't lose a war if she comes up against the Talliti."

"The question is, will we win one?"

Randall cocked a quizzical eye at Dawson. "You don't know your history very well."

"What does that mean?"

Randall shrugged. "Giant brains were one of the chief reasons for the end of warfare on Earth four centuries ago. They got to be so perfect that each one cancelled out all the others—ergo, stalemate. Everyone was physically incapable of defeating the enemy, and it became economically impossible to maintain a fight where the immovable object came face to face with the irresistible force. War ceased to have either profit or future."

"And you think the same will happen if we have to fight the Talliti?"

"It would have happened with the Lutherians if they'd had the same facilities. As it is they're only postponing the day of their final defeat. In fact, they'd probably be better off if they gave up now. They're like a man playing dice when he knows they're loaded against him. No race can defeat a machine which is logical, perfect, unemotional, and in command of all the facts."

Dawson nodded. Hendrix orders had been specific—investigate and report, and that was all he could do. At least Earth would be prepared for that time in the future when she stood where the Lutherians stood now.

"If only—ah, what's the use." He slapped his knee in disgust. "This is a hell of a Galaxy, Randall. Why don't people learn to like each other?"

"You only like someone when you respect him. That goes for races as well as individuals."

Dawson made his report to Hendrix the next day, and at the same time he made a last effort to obtain Terran intervention. It didn't work.

"We're not justified in taking any action which might extend the conflict," Hendrix told him bluntly. "If other races start taking sides there may be no end to the trouble. We'll be in the middle of a Galaxy wide flare-up before we know it."

"Our turn may come sooner than you think," retorted Dawson angrily.

"Okay," replied Hendrix. "And when it does we'll be prepared for it. We'll get out of our own mess—and we won't involve anyone else."

There was a long pause as Dawson realised suddenly that his last hope of aiding the Lutherians was gone. There was a sudden deep pit of despair within him, a realisation that, at last, this was the end of the line.

He said, futilely, "They've nothing left."

"So what?" Hendrix shrugged, a tiny gesture on the small, grey screen. "When you've nothing left you bluff. Tell 'em that—it may give them some ideas. At least they can't be any worse off."

"Bluff? What the hell with?" snarled Dawson.

"That's their worry. What are you going to do?"

"Pack up, I guess, and head home. There's nothing more I can do here, and I don't want to be around when the light goes out."

"Right. We'll see you soon."

The screen went blank as Hendrix broke the connection, and Dawson sat back in the chair beside the communication set. A few minutes ago he'd been alive and fighting. While there had been an outside chance of convincing the Terran authorities of the need for intervention there was something to hope for. Now—?

Bluff, Hendrix said. Dawson pulled a cigarette from his jerkin pocket. How could you bluff a mechanical brain that did its job logically, perfectly and unemotionally? He broke the cigarette viciously in half and threw the pieces into the waste chute. You could only fight logic with logic, perfection with perfection, so that a stalemate resulted that was of no profit to anyone.

The Lutherians had nothing with which to fight but the fallibility of their own brains. If—? He sat up stiffly in his chair. Bluff, said Hendrix, when you've got nothing left, bluff.

Dawson left the cabin at a dead run, the suddenness of his ideas forcing his body to action before he'd even stopped to think out, step by step, the faint, nebulous glow that had been sparked by Hendrix' one word. Bluff!

In ten minutes he was at the door of Arvan's office, and the Lutheran stared in blank surprise as Dawson stormed in.

"Arvan, would your people be willing to take a chance? Any chance? Even one that seems too ridiculous to bother with at first sight?"

The Lutheran hesitated, clearly too surprised to react at once.

"Well?"

"I do not know. I—"

"Look, you're in the biggest mess you're ever likely to be in. You'll be finished in a very short time if things go on as they are at the moment. Right?"

"Yes."

"Then you can't be any worse off whatever you do."

"I suppose not."

"You're damned right, you suppose not," Dawson told him grimly. "Now, this is what you do. You've got four big spaceship repair shops on the far side of this field that are being used for storage depots."

"Yes."

"Clear them. Empty them. Surround them with a bare strip of ground that's booby-trapped and floodlit. Seal them off with a break-proof fence, security guards, force fields, the lot. Seal them off and make them the biggest top secret project this planet has ever known. Bring in scientists of all types—it doesn't matter what their speciality—just bring them in. Take your top men from whatever else they're working on and slap them on this new project."

Arvan was gaping open mouthed astonishment.

"As soon as the project is sealed off start shipping in sealed crates marked 'Top Secret' and filled with anything that looks technical, you know, valves, transformers, atomic reactors, electronic equipment, generators—anything. There's just one thing—anything and anyone that goes inside that security ring doesn't come out—they're in to stay, until you've won or lost a war."

There was blank silence as he finished speaking. Arvan stirred at last and whispered, "I am bewildered," and his eyes bore witness to the truth of his words.

Dawson laughed. "There's one final touch. Start rumours about a date. Pick one for about two Galactic periods from now and build towards it. Shift your military formations around behind the battle area. Ship in new equipment and supplies. Do anything you like, but do it at random, and do it with that date in view. Your General Staff can handle the details."

"But what is the point of all this?"

"Shut up and listen. I'm leaving for Earth tomorrow. Once I've gone all you do is build for that date, and when it

comes you mount an all out offensive against the Talliti, and you keep it up until something happens."

"I suppose you have some idea at the back of all this—this chaos?" remarked Arvan.

"I have," admitted Dawson, "but I'm not telling you what it is. Either you take it on trust or you don't take it at all."

"I think we should be told—"

"I don't. Too many ears make too many mouths."

Arvan's eyes studied Dawson impassively. "You are asking a lot."

"I know it."

"I cannot give an answer on my own responsibility."

"I know that, too. That's why I shan't leave for Earth until tomorrow. You have that much time to consult your General Council."

Arvan nodded. "Very well, Mister Dawson. I am convinced." He smiled thinly. "But only because I have seen you at work in the past. If I did not have personal knowledge of your—ah—abilities I would dismiss the whole thing from my mind. As it is I will do my best to support your plans."

Dawson smiled and turned towards the door. "One more thing. When you've decided to do all this, make sure that those of your armed forces who are likely to be captured by the Talliti know just what is going on here."

He was gone through the door before the astonished Arvan could ask the inevitable question.

Dawson slept well that night, not because he was confident of the outcome, but because he was back in the fight. He was doing something and not just sitting around waiting for the inevitable.

Randall wakened him with the news that Arvan was going ahead with his suggestions, despite the fact that the Lutheran General Council was not unanimous in its support. Before they took off for Earth some three hours later there were already signs of great activity around the four giant buildings that bulked low on the horizon on the far side of the field.

They left Luther late in the morning, and back on Earth their departure was noted in the files of the Space Commission. There was a record, too, during the next few weeks, of their arrival first on Cintra Five and then on Bernal Two—both planets well off the direct Earth - Luther route. In each place they stayed several days.

Thereafter, so far as the Space Commission was concerned they vanished.

In his office high in the massive bulk of the SPACE building Hendrix brooded massively, and champed on the inevitable large, black cigar. Two days without sleep had left big, black circles under his eyes, and his temper—never good—was positively murderous.

Three weeks earlier Dawson had left Bernal Two in Terran scout 342, and since then had been conspicuous both by his absence and his silence. Nine days earlier the Lutherians had mounted a massive offensive against the Talliti which, at first, had appeared to be abortive. Then, slowly, the tide had turned. The Lutherians began to advance, and the Talliti gave every sign of being on the receiving end of an almighty beating. All the pent up fury of the Lutheran race had come to the front as they saw, for the first time, the success of their efforts. The last report, two days earlier, had told of the hurried retreat of the Talliti, and of an ever increasing impetus to the Lutheran onslaught.

The Space Commission wanted to know why. They asked Hendrix because he should have had the answer—but Hendrix didn't know because his agent had not reported.

For two days he had burned up the sub-space radio links between Earth and Terran officials on planets between there and Luther. If Dawson showed up anywhere, anytime, and in any condition then Hendrix wanted to know. In those two days no fewer than seventeen 'no trace' or 'negative' reports had been placed on his desk and with the arrival of each one Hendrix had grown angrier.

And then, suddenly and with no warning, Dawson was on Earth.

Cruiser scout 342 had landed at Lunar Base barely four hours previously, and a laconic video message announced that Dawson was on his way Earthside to report in person.

Hendrix brooded for another four hours, and with the moment of meeting drawing nearer his mood grew progressively blacker.

His chin jutted slightly and the cigar jerked alarmingly as the door to the outer office clicked, and seconds later the smiling form of Johnny Dawson strolled casually in. Hendrix watched him silently and implacably as he settled himself in the visitor's chair beside the desk.

"Hallo, Boss," said Dawson.

"You stupid, lamebrained, no good son of a—"

Dawson tutted gently.

"I've got the whole Space Commission crawling all over me," roared Hendrix, "asking questions I can't answer. They want a report from my agent—and I don't even know where my agent is. You—you—" Words failed him and he lapsed into fuming apoplectic incoherence.

"I thought everyone knew," remarked Dawson innocently.

"Knew what?"

"The Lutherians are winning the war—"

"I do know it," bellowed Hendrix, slamming his fist angrily on the desk top. "The Commission knows it—but we don't know why. Three months ago the Lutherians were on the end of one hell of a thrashing. Then you go there and the situation changes. We've had rumours by the score coming in from all over the Galaxy."

"Such as?"

"Such as one to the effect that the Lutherians have the biggest and most powerful electronic calculator ever dreamed of. There's just one thing wrong—you and I know they couldn't do it."

The desk phone buzzed lightly, and Hendrix broke off to lift the earpiece.

"Hendrix—yes, go ahead."

He listened, unmoving, for several long seconds, and then replaced the earpiece slowly and pensively. His black eyes swivelled to Dawson thoughtfully.

"Restricted message," he announced softly. "The Talliti sued for an armistice twenty-four hours ago, and have agreed to all the Lutherians conditions for the termination of hostilities." He grinned without humour. "A message from Luther thanks the Space Commission for its help in sending as its representative John Dawson. As evidence of the vast assistance which Mister Dawson has rendered the Lutheran government intends to make a suitable financial reward to Mister Dawson."

"Well, well," Dawson smiled happily.

"Stop preening yourself," snapped Hendrix. "What happened out there that we ought to know about? Let's get back to this mysterious electronic genius the Lutherians just happened to come by."

"You probably know as much as I do—"

"Stop playing tag, will you? I've had those rumours back-tracked, and they all started in the region of Cintra Five and Bernal Two."

"Smart," nodded Dawson.

"I've also had reports of a giant, top secret project which has mushroomed on Luther. There's only one thing odd about it." The black eyes narrowed as Hendrix leaned forward in his chair. "No one knows what it's for, and everyone and everything that goes inside, stays inside. A week or two before the Lutherians launched their attack, their forces in the battle area started to regroup." Hendrix leaned back in his chair. "Something went on in that project that turned the Lutherians from a beaten race to the fightingest bunch of terrors in the Galaxy. All right—you tell me—what was it?"

"Nothing," replied Dawson with disarming honesty.

"I know you, Dawson. What do you mean by nothing?"

"Just that, boss. We spread a few rumours in places where we knew they'd get back to the Talliti. They, in turn, got further information from their prisoners that something big was cooking on Luther. I expect they checked and double-checked with neutral races who had traders and other officials on Luther, and of course they learned nothing more than the prisoners could tell them.

"And that was all. They had two pieces of vital information which they allied to another fact—that the Lutherians were regrouping for an all-out attack which was to begin on a certain date. I imagine their intelligence system worked overtime trying to figure it all out in the short time at their disposal but they never had a chance because there was nothing to uncover. They were chasing something that just didn't exist."

"And?" prompted Hendrix.

"They didn't dare take a risk. They were playing for big stakes and no one takes a chance in the position they were in. They did what I thought they'd do."

"Which was?"

"They fed the information into their own calculator as data which it had to have for the successful prosecution of the war, and the repulsion of the Lutheran attack which they knew was coming."

"I'm way ahead of you," said Hendrix softly.

"I thought you might be. Anyway, I'll finish it for you. They fed in data which just wasn't true, and the calculator was set to extrapolate the future movements of the Lutheran forces *with that data in its possession*. So, what happens? It figures what the Lutherians calculator would do under all the circumstances and it comes up with an answer. Then the Lutherians attack, but they don't do what is expected of them because they're only using the brains that nature gave them."

"In other words," broke in Hendrix, "they were acting at random when the Talliti expected otherwise."

"Right," grinned Dawson. "The Talliti brought defeat upon themselves by feeding incorrect data to their big brain, and as fast as it tried to figure out the Lutherians future moves it was proved wrong because the Lutherians did something entirely different." Dawson shrugged. "Once the random factor had been introduced there was only one way out—but I doubt if the Talliti thought of it, and if they did it wouldn't have done them much good."

"How come?"

"They could have switched off their calculator and fought a legitimate war. As I say, it wouldn't have done them much good because the Lutherians had the bit between their teeth and the scent of revenge in their nostrils. Nothing would have turned them back once they started to go forward."

"I suppose you set all this up?"

Dawson nodded.

"But why the roundabout trip to Cintra and Bernal?"

"I figured that if the rumours all came direct from Luther then the Talliti might smell a rat. If they got nothing from Luther except the news about a giant project then they'd be more likely to swallow the bait when other rumours came from somewhere else."

"And they fell for it," Hendrix smiled. "Well, we knew if anyone could figure a way out of it, then you could."

There was a deathly hush as Dawson digested the apparently innocent remark.

"I smell a large, stinking rat," he said at last. "You sound like you knew all along what was happening with the Talliti."

"We did," agreed Hendrix blandly. "But we couldn't let on—not officially, anyway."

"Not officially, eh?" snarled Dawson. "But you could send an unofficial representative with orders to do no more

than look around—the Galactic Union couldn't rap your knuckles for that, could they, Hendrix? Is that it?"

"Well—"

"Well, nothing. I know you and I know the Commission. If I'd stepped out of line and got pulled in by the Galactic Union you'd have denied all knowledge of it, pleaded innocence and left me to stew in my own juice."

"We'd have taken care of you."

"Well, I'm taking care of myself from now on," retorted Dawson, angrily. "You can have my resignation as of now—and you can tell the whole blasted Space Commission what a two-timing bunch of vultures I think they are."

Hendrix smiled indulgently. "All right, so you're upset. You'll cool off. Think it over, you won't resign. If we put the black on you, you wouldn't get a job cleaning sewers—and you know it."

Dawson leaned over the desk and grinned viciously. "You've got a short memory, boss. I'm independent. Remember? The Lutherians are a very grateful race, and I don't think I'll be stuck for a little hard cash to see me settled in comfort."

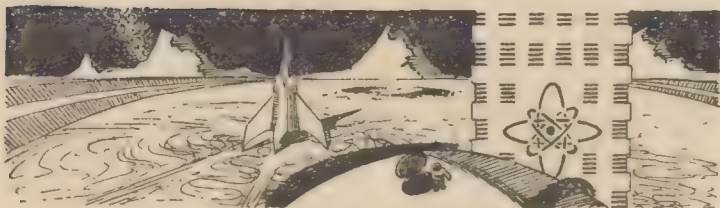
Hendrix face blanched a trifle. "Now, wait a minute—"

But Dawson was already at the door. He paused with it half-way open.

"This is one fact I'd love to see you explain to the Commission, Hendrix," he said. "And somehow, I don't think you'll get a very good reception."

The slam of the door sounded, knell-like, as he left.

Lan Wright



In their struggle against the Earth telepaths the small group of Lessigians are gradually being killed off. Peter Keenan decides that desperate measures are now necessary if he and his galactic colleagues are to save themselves and the Federation plan.

THE UNINHIBITED

By Dan Morgan

Conclusion

FOREWORD

Peter Keenan, to give him the name he is known by on Earth, is a member of a small group of individuals from the planet Lessigia who are stationed in England to inhibit babies born with telepathic instincts, thus making them non-receptive to exterior thoughts. In the wide Galactic Federation to which the Lessigians belong, telepathic humans had once developed naturally but been persecuted and finally exterminated. To guard against a similar occurrence on Earth and to nurse the telepathy gene to maturity for the benefit of all the Federation the Lessigians are on Earth to trace and control all such human beings who are born with a telepathic tendency. By means of a Vion detector they can detect such a tendency before actual birth, one Lessigian then attending the birth in the guise of a doctor and planting a tiny inhibitor needle deep in the child's brain, thus blocking out extraneous thought-streams.

Keenan is present at the birth of a son to Charles and Judy Martin in Guildford, where he has fallen in love with Judy's sister Marie. The baby recognises the apparent menace in Keenan's mind and communicates its fear to Marie, who is herself an inhibited telepath. Keenan however plants the inhibitor needle, silences the child's mental cries for help and pacifies Marie. By Lessigian law he should then have erased from her memory all knowledge of himself but because of his feelings for her he fails to do so.

Marie checks with the doctor who should have attended her sister and finds that he does not know Doctor Keenan. A check at Keenan's Hotel shows that he has left without trace. Meanwhile, Keenan has gone to the Lessigian headquarters at Russell Square in London where he reports to his chief, Lockyer, who censures him for not erasing Marie's memory and orders him to return to Guildford at once and do so.

Meanwhile, at the St. Vincent Neurological Hospital in Surrey, senior surgeon Ralph Tern performs a delicate brain operation on a man named Dashiell and discovers one of the inhibitor needles. Dashiell recovers to find that he is a telepath and gradually learns to control his new gift while Tern and his assistant decide to keep their knowledge secret for the time being.

Keenan, having seen Marie again and once more failed to erase her memory, is driving back to London when he finds his mind taken over by another powerful mental force. In the ensuing battle of wills his car is wrecked and the contact broken, but not before he is certain that his attacker must be an uninhibited Earth-human. Reporting this disastrous event to Lockyer it is decided that they must send an urgent report to Anrael, their immediate superior who is stationed in Birmingham, who will inform Lessigia of the unexpected development. Contact with Anrael by radio proves impossible as the Birmingham group fails to answer and it is decided that Keenan together with Pattin and Megoran shall try and trace the uninhibited telepath who mentally attacked Keenan.

Assisted by their Vion detector the trail leads to the St. Vincent Neurological Hospital and Pattin opens his mind in an attempt to contact the human telepath. Within moments he is dead, his mind blasted out of existence by the overwhelming power of the Earthman. Leaving Megoran in the car, Keenan gets inside the hospital only to find that Dashiell has disappeared, driven away in an ambulance. They give chase but eventually lose the vehicle in a small industrial area and decide to return to Russell Square.

Lockyer tells them that he hopes Anrael will be able to contact Lessigia but that it might be many weeks before a relief ship arrives. Their efforts to contact the Birmingham group fails and Keenan fears that their colleagues are already under attack.

At the Neurological Hospital Ralph Tern has a caller, Damon Gregory, apparently a secret service agent with considerable knowledge of the Lessigians. He invites Tern to join a select group of specialists working to release inhibited telepaths and help finally overthrow the galactic invaders. Tern agrees.

Keenan discovers that the Russell Square house is being watched and apprehends the observer, a private detective named Stacey. He and Megoran obtain some useful information from the man's mind which increases their fears for the Birmingham group. Keenan decides, against Lockyer's wishes, to go there and find his colleague Pelee Huizinger in the hope of enlisting his aid in combatting the newly organised telepaths.

Arriving at Birmingham he finds the premises also being watched. Entering by a back way he finds the house ransacked and in an upstairs room another colleague, Warnock, trying to repair their sub-etheric radio set. He informs Keenan that Anrael has been murdered and that Huizinger is being held by the police as a suspect. Keenan decides to attempt Pelee's rescue and effects an entry into the police station by means of mental imagery, causing Jameson, the police chief, to think that he is Damon Gregory who has been sent by Security to collect the prisoner.

Jameson releases Huizinger into Keenan's custody but as they leave the building Huizinger is killed by a mental blast from a hidden human telepath. Keenan manages to escape and together with Warnock return to London to warn Lockyer.

XIV

It was a new world, strange, frightening and yet wonderful. Marie walked along the drive, listening to the crunch of the gravel beneath her shoes and feeling the warmth of the morning sunlight on her skin. She was aware of all the sensations of sight, sound and touch, of the scent of the flowers that flanked the drive. But a new dimension had been added; a roaring soundless presence, the teeming impulses that flowed around her from the minds of all living creatures.

A bird whistled in a tree a few yards away. She stopped and looked at the little brown creature as he ruffled his feathers, sensing the steady burning flame that was its mental vibration. No coherent thought, but a small impulse of rudimentary happiness, a good-to-be-alive feeling.

She moved closer. The flame changed colour, the colour of fear, and the bird flew away. She walked on down the drive holding the exquisitely sensitive instrument that was her newly gifted mind poised in the grip of her will.

She was approaching the main road now, and this was only the second time she had ventured out of the grounds since the operation. The other, two days ago, had been an episode of horror which had left her distraught and shaking from the rush of impulses that forced themselves into her untutored mind. In the nursing home she had come to feel her new awareness more gradually, using the sympathetic, understanding mind of Tern as her yardstick. Tern held nothing back there was no sign of resentment as she probed into his mind, marvelling at and experiencing his skills in this manner which was something more than vicarious, completely sharing all the knowledge of his mature conscious mind.

Then there were the others like herself: Shaun, a strange, haunted creature with his beaked nose, who kept his mind so tightly shielded whenever she was near. He had been the first of the sensitives to have his powers restored to him here at the nursing home, but he seemed to be carrying some terrible burden of guilt or fear which he was not prepared to share with the others. Delan, a young fair-haired man, whose feelings flowed out to her with no attempt at concealment was no mystery. But she refused to return his naked frankness. Over the past few days he had made her begin to think about the man-woman relationship between telepathic sensitives. The ideal thought of mental union must, she realised, remain an ideal never to be allowed to exist. Such a state would immediately cancel out the cultural concept of romantic love upon which her feelings were based. Perhaps some day she would be able to change her outlook, when she had explored the frightening darkness of her own unconscious mind; but until that time it seemed ironic that this new-found awareness must make her even more alone, living within herself, than she had been previously.

Besides the sensitives who had been operated on there were the others, the ones with the bewildered look of beings caught

up in some tremendous events which they did not quite understand. More of them came in every day, accompanied by Gregory's hard-faced agents, to be interviewed and given the choice between this new awareness and a return to the normal life which they had been living. Some of them—perhaps cowards, perhaps wise—refused. It was, after all, their own life, and Tern insisted that the risks of the operation be fully explained to each one. It was impossible to communicate with them mentally and give them reassurance in that way, rather than by mere words. The vibrators planted in their brains by the enemy blanked out all transit of thought, both inward and outward.

Marie wondered again about the vibrating things and the race who had planted them. There was something horribly alien in the concept that they should interfere thus in the life of another race for their own selfish ends. Gregory's mind held that same humming cacaphony—so no mental contact was possible with him either. But Gregory needed no one's reassurance; he was dedicated in his task and ruthless. He had explained to her that as the organiser of the defensive group he must forgo the removal of the vibrator from his own mind—without it the enemy might be able to rob him of the knowledge of the plans of the group.

Marie was walking along the concrete footpaths beside a high, well-trimmed hedge. A red school bus passed her, and for a moment she allowed her attention to rest on the babbling joy of the children. These were animal high spirits, marred only occasionally by the jarring impressions of memory and conditioning which heralded the approach of a mature adult outlook in the child. But for the most part they had not yet been stripped of their sense of wonder by the cruel world of reality.

Further along now, walking briskly, an old man, full of years, leaning on a stick approached her. She recoiled at the awareness of approaching death that hung over his mind like a grinning devil-mask, pulling down his vitality and forcing him by his own mental attitude to both accept and dread it. The mind was a beaten, cowering thing, whose sadness and defeat was flowing into her own. The sufferings of the world were hers now, as a telepath, and there was so much more of suffering than of joy.

Pulling her mind away from the horrid fascination Marie hurried on past the old man, looking for sunlight and hope with which to cleanse her thought-stream. She rounded the corner and noticed a black car parked beside the footpath a few yards further along.

A man with a thin, aesthetic face was sitting in the front seat of the car, bending over something at his side. There was a kind of strength yet gentleness about his profile which immediately attracted her. Her questing mind moved automatically in his direction and detected a humming, impermeable barrier.

The man looked up and met her gaze. She was almost beside the car now and through the open window she could see the object he had been so intent upon lying on the seat beside him. On its top she could see something which looked like an upended telescreen, showing dots and sparkling flashes of light. Right in the centre of the screen was a pulsating spiral. The effect as she gazed at it was hypnotic.

The voice of the man broke the spell. "Hallo. I hadn't expected anyone quite so charming." His deep brown eyes were smiling at her.

"What is that?" asked Marie, pointing to the screen.

"It would take too long to explain, my dear," he said.

Marie, remembering the vibrating network she had detected round his mind said: "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, and the others like you . . . My name is Lockyer." His face was quite old and lined, but there was a gentleness and charm there which quietened the alarm in her heart.

"You have one of those things in your head—is that why you are looking for us?"

He eyed her keenly for a swift moment, then his face relaxed again. "You can tell that? What else?"

She recoiled, embarrassment flooding over her. "Why nothing—your mind is shielded both inwards and outwards by its vibration. In any case I would not probe further without your permission. I'm sorry." She realised suddenly that she was talking to this total stranger in terms that should have been utter nonsense to him—but *he evidently understood her*.

"Don't worry, Marie. It is Marie, isn't it? I would like you to take me to your leader. With so charming a companion I can have nothing but luck."

"How did you know my name?" she asked, startled.

"We . . . have a mutual friend," Lockyer said. He opened the car door and stepped out into the road. He was quite tall, almost as tall as . . . who? *Who was it she had been about to think of?* He joined her on the footpath. "Shall we go along, back the way you have just come?"

Who or what he was she was not sure, but she found it quite easy to trust him. He might be someone who had found out about the crystalline vibrator which was killing the powers of his mind and had come along to join of his own free will. But he had a look of greater confidence than she ever remembered seeing on the faces of new members of the group.

"You wanted to see Doctor Tern?" she asked.

"Yes, of course, it would be Tern," he said, half to himself, and then to her: "Yes, Doctor Tern . . . and perhaps a man named . . . Gregory?"

They had turned the corner now and were strolling back along by the tall hedge. Doubt assailed Marie again, but she shrugged it off—what harm could this ordinary, but charming elderly man do within the nursing home?

As they turned in at the gate and crunched along the drive Marie sensed a certain new tenseness in the attitude of her companion. She glanced sideways to find him looking intently at her.

"If only I knew with certainty," he said softly. "I would rather place my life in your hands."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, my dear—only that I must be sure of meeting your leader, when I would rather spend my time with you."

"The operation is not really dangerous," she said, thinking to reassure him. "Doctor Tern is a wonderful surgeon."

Lockyer smiled ruefully. "He is indeed. We had not expected to meet one so brilliant."

She considered the odd remark as they walked together up the steps and through the open front door of the house into the hall. She gestured to the open door of the lounge on their left.

"If you would like to sit down in there for a moment I will go and find out if Doctor Tern and Mr. Gregory will see you."

"No, please." He placed a hand lightly on her arm. "Would you mind very much if I came along with you?"

She halted for a moment, searching his face, hesitant. Behind her she was aware that Delan had risen from his seat in the lounge and was walking towards them.

Don't you see we are two of a kind? A new Adam and Eve, the beginnings of a new race. Everything I have, my mind, my body . . .

Marie deliberately shut her mind to the thoughts which streamed from Delan. "Very well," she said to Lockyer. They walked along the deep maroon-patterned carpet and up the broad, mahogany banistered staircase.

"Thank you, Marie. If all goes well they may be something I can do for you in return. Perhaps I can make some amends."

She looked at him again, enquiringly.

He shook his head. "I will explain . . . later."

Gregory's office was along to the right down the corridor. Marie knocked lightly on the panelled door, then tried the handle. It yielded, and pushing the door open she stepped into the room.

Gregory was seated massively at his desk, whilst Tern, always mobile, paced back and forth before him, talking rapidly.

" . . . realise the seriousness of the situation, but Shaun is almost in a state of complete mental collapse. By taking him to Birmingham so soon after the operation you risked both his life and sanity, as I warned you at the time. You will have to go easier on these people, Gregory, they . . ." Tern stopped his tirade and turned, sensing Marie's presence.

Gregory raised his handsome head. "Yes, Marie—you wanted to see me?" From his mind there was nothing but the high-pitched hum of the Vibrating shield, although she caught a flash of annoyance from Tern at the interruption.

She was about to speak when she heard a sound behind her and Lockyer strode boldly past her towards the doctor and Gregory.

Gregory's large body stiffened suddenly, his face drained of all colour. Then he galvanised into action. A drawer in his desk crashed open and his right hand reappeared gripping a black automatic.

A pencil of flame spurted from the muzzle of the gun as Gregory leapt to his feet. The report of the gun smashed in on Marie's eardrums, followed swiftly by the crash of Gregory's overturned chair.

Lockyer snapped erect and staggered back a pace, clutching at his chest. His mouth opened soundlessly.

The automatic crashed again . . . and again . . .

Lockyer spun round as the bullets tore through his body and she saw his stricken face with horrible clarity—every line deep etched with pain, the brown eyes glazing. He fell forward, his body crumpling like a rubber doll slowly deflating.

Marie looked down at the body at her feet . . . and screamed. There was no volition, her mouth seemed to drop open and the sound poured out. Consciousness and sanity fleeing from her she stumbled forward.

She felt Gregory's strong arms round her body, supporting her, but her eyes were closed. She was sobbing, laughing, screaming—she never wanted to open her eyes again and see what had happened.

There was a man . . . he was still alive. It was a nightmare. None of it was true. Oh, please God, let it not be true ! I brought him here to his death !

"It's all right, Marie." Gregory's voice thrust insistently down into the depths of her hysteria. "Believe me, I'm deeply sorry you had to be the one to witness this. But *he* was one of them—one of the invaders. I had to kill him."

No ! He was a charming man, with a gentleness in him. And he was alive. There was a kindness and warmth . . . He was alive, don't you see ? He *is* alive. Nobody is dead. That is how it must be. Please, God, let it all be a dream.

Vaguely, through the curtain of her fevered mutterings; the sound of footsteps, voices, strained with alarm.

"Are you all right, Doctor ? Yes, but the girl . . . Take care of her, will you, Hughes ? . . . A sedative, I think . . . Yes, her own room . . . familiar surroundings when she recovers . . ."

Eyes, keep closed ! I don't want to see it again. Why did he have to die ? Why did Gregory kill him ? Eyes, muscles strained shut . . .

Marie, this is Delan, please . . . Let me come to you, comfort you . . . I could live for that forever, just to have you . . .

The pressure of arms lifting. Unsteady movement . . .

"Open the door."

Movement again. Then lowering, a softness beneath.

The sharp, fiery prick of a needle in the forearm. Stay tightly closed eyes ! The fire, the shooting stars on the black-

ness behind the lids . . . But in here, in myself, nothing can come to me. I am alone . . .

"No need to stay here, nurse. She should be out for about six hours. Call in and have a look at her after lunch, will you?"

A door closing. When a door closes another opens, when a door closes another opens when a door closes when a door . . .

Numbness, flowing outwards now. When a door closes the stars on the lids stay closed eyes oh God is this to die another opens a door a door . . .

XV

"Lockyer has been gone twelve hours now—where is he?" Keenan flexed his fingers, trying to rid them of the tension that gripped all the muscles in his body.

"We'll wait. There's nothing else we can do." Fulby was sitting calmly in a chair, leafing through a book. He glanced over at Warnock, who was still working on the communicator. "How is it coming?"

Warnock laid down the soldering iron and shrugged. "I've managed to bump the signal up a bit, but I doubt if it will be strong enough to reach anybody."

"And even if it does—what can they do to help us?" burst out Keenan. "If they capture Lockyer they will dig our location out of his mind within a few minutes."

Megoran looked up from the Vion detector screen. "Be patient, Pether."

"All we can do is wait," said Fulby. "We have no idea of where Lockyer was heading, or what he intended doing."

"And this child?" Megoran pointed to the pulsating light on the screen. "In a few hours it will be born and begin to develop its mental powers, a beacon that will attract the attention of any sensitive within ten miles."

"If we have not heard from Lockyer by the time that happens, we shall have to inhibit it in the usual manner," Fulby said.

"We *shall not* hear from Lockyer," Keenan said. "Why can't you admit the obvious? He would have contacted us by now, if he were able."

"Pether! Fulby!" Megoran looked up from the detector screen, his broad face pale. "Come here and look at this!"

Keenan hurried across the room and looked over Megoran's shoulder. An intensely burning spiral of pulsating light had appeared at the twelve o'clock position on the screen and was moving slowly downward.

"A sensitive—and coming this way," breathed Fulby. "Make sure that all your sub-vocs are on a screening pattern."

"That will be more likely to draw his attention," Warnock said.

"What difference does that make?" Keenan's mouth twisted. "He probably knows where we are anyway. At least we stand some chance of resisting his attack with the help of the sub-vocs. Now what do you think has happened to Lockyer?"

"We don't know for certain yet," said Fulby. "In any case we shall be safe for the time being. There's still a chance that Warnock may be able to contact somebody."

"The Supreme Council guard to the rescue, eh?" Keenan said cynically. "We may be all right for the time being, but we're in no position to stand a siege. Sooner or later we shall have to sleep, and then our sub-voc protection will be useless."

"Wait a minute! See that?" Megoran pointed to the pulsating light. It was no longer moving towards the centre of the screen, but off towards the right.

"He's going towards the child," Keenan said.

Fulby relaxed. "In that case we may still be safe."

"No, you idiot!" burst out Keenan. "How long do you think it will take him to identify the source of that radiation and start making his way back here?"

"We don't even know that he *was* coming here," protested Fulby.

"What else would a sensitive be doing on his own in this area?" asked Keenan. "Gregory only has a small number of them at his disposal—certainly not enough to send them out on joy rides."

"You're only guessing," Fulby said.

Keenan straightened up decisively. "I'm going out there to try and make contact . . . alone. If I fail you will see the result on the screen. Then you can make other plans."

"No! Stay here!" Fulby said. "You would only be throwing your life away."

"It's my life."

"Let him try," intervened Megoran. "He may at least be able to divert the sensitive away from here."

Fulby eyed Keenan thoughtfully. "You realise what this means if you fail? You'll be absolutely on your own, with only your own resources, such as they are, to protect you. You can't take the detector, because it is the only one we have here."

"That means that the only way he will be able to detect the sensitive is by scanning with his sub-voc," said Megoran, frowning.

"Exactly," Fulby said.

To trace the sensitive with his sub-voc would mean that his mind would be open and defenceless each time he transmitted a pulse—as open and defenceless as Huizinger's had been. Keenan thought of the twisted body, and the contorted, agonised face of his friend. His mouth was suddenly very dry.

"Very well—I'll take my chances that way. At least I shall be doing something instead of being caged up in this place. Either way it seems the end will be the same." He paused in the doorway. "If I don't make it, and Lockyer *should* happen to get back . . . Tell him I'm sorry I lied to him about the girl but I'd do it again. I don't think he'll understand—but tell him anyway."

Keenan walked out of the foyer of the apartment building and across the courtyard to the main road. Some of the oppression had lifted now that he was out of the fear-laden atmosphere of the flat. Perhaps it was because he had at last made some kind of decision; whether for good or evil did not matter so much as the fact that his destiny was once more in his own hands.

He stood for a moment on the pavement, watching the faces of the passers by. Just ordinary people, living an ordinary, sane existence. Men and women, being born, falling in love and dying. But with a measure of security that he could never know. What if he were to walk away now, mingling with that crowd. Would he escape all this? Perhaps, somewhere over on the north of the city he would find Marie . . .

The pleasant fantasy faded beneath a surge of painful recollection. All memory of him had been erased from the mind of Marie. She would not even recognise him.

He muttered a curse and walked towards a nearby bus stop. A few minutes later the bus arrived and he stepped aboard. The man sitting opposite him was intently reading a newspaper, a light-brown brief-case and an umbrella balanced precariously

at his feet. Keenan glanced casually at the headlines. So far the story had not been released to the press. Whoever was working against them considered secrecy of equal importance.

The bus stopped with a jerk at a traffic signal and Keenan snapped out of his reverie. Glancing out of the window he saw that he had reached his destination. He scrambled out onto the pavement just as the bus started to move again. According to Megoran's directions the house where the sensitive child lay waiting to be born was only about two hundred yards from this spot.

His plan of campaign was vague; a mad hope that he might be able to do something useful if he could contrive to meet the sensitive face to face. To talk with the man, reason with him perhaps, maintaining his sub-voc shielding throughout the conversation. The whole thing must be carried out somewhere where there were other people around. If his guess that secrecy was also important to the other group was correct, that would make it more unlikely that the sensitive would be prepared to use physical violence. He decided that he needed more time to think, and walked into a nearby coffee bar.

A few casually dressed teenagers clustered round a howling juke box near the doorway made way for him as he entered. The place was decorated in flashy red and gold, with a counter on the left and a series of partitioned booths with tables reaching down into the long narrow interior. Keenan obtained a cup at the counter and walked towards the rear of the bar, away from the pounding of the juke box. A man in a wide-brimmed grey hat, playing the pintable at the bend of the counter, looked at him curiously for a moment then went back to his game.

All of the booths were empty, but Keenan selected the one furthest from the door and sat down. There he was reasonably well hidden, but he could see anyone who walked in through the front door.

He prepared to lay himself as a bait for the sensitive, fully conscious that within a few seconds he could be lying in the gangway a twisted corpse, blasted by the power of his own nervous system touched off by the sensitive.

Resting his chin on his hands he tensed himself. Perspiration trickled down his face and in between his fingers. The juke box stopped for a moment and the whole place was suddenly still.

He closed his eyes. One hand slipped beneath his coat and cut the sub-voc pattern. Then, at the finest moment of his temporal threshold, replaced it. The whole operation took something less than a second.

It had been there; the hard, strong echo of a mature sensitive mind. This was no unborn child, but the integrated mental processes of a highly intelligent adult. There had been no suggestion of attack, merely a surprised awareness of his existence. But with this kind of attack there would be no warning—just a sudden, smashing force—then oblivion.

He reached out with a shaking hand and picked up his coffee. A break, some atom of time to allow his tortured nerves to regain control. The second probe would be the test. The sensitive would be fully aware of his presence now, and of his location. The coffee was scalding hot, but he gulped it reflexly, ignoring the pain of his seared mouth and throat.

The juke box crashed into life again.

Bracing his arms on the table, Keenan closed his eyes once more—and opened up his sub-voc. Contact was immediate. The sensitive was closer now, questioning. There was bewilderment and a demand to know his identity, which at any moment might turn into a ravening aggressiveness.

He withdrew, not daring to leave his mind unprotected any longer in the face of this unknown. The lure was working. The sensitive was somewhere in the immediate area, possibly only a few yards away. And coming closer . . .

Keenan wiped the back of his hand across his sweat-moistened forehead and looked towards the door. It swung open, but the person who had entered was hidden for a moment by the crowd round the juke box. He tensed forward, half rising from his seat.

Marie, with the dragging gait of a sleepwalker, pushed her way through the teenagers and headed unsteadily towards him. Her face was wild-eyed and without make-up, her blonde hair ruffled untidily. One hand clutched at the collar of a light raincoat which was slung over her shoulders.

She hesitated a few feet from him, looking round in a bewildered manner.

"Marie !" Keenan breathed the name, unbelievably.

She stiffened, her eyes swimming into focus at the sound of his voice. "Who are you ?" There was no recognition in her eyes.

She reeled sideways. Her right hand moved away from her throat and clutched at the side of the booth for support—missing its aim by several inches. The coat fluttered to the floor.

Keenan jumped forward and caught her. Placing his arms about her frail body he lowered her gently into the seat. She slumped forward over the table like a rag doll, only her eyes in her pale, childlike face seemed alive.

"Thank you," she said faintly. "You helped me."

"Stay here," Keenan said, moving away.

The counter-hand eyed him curiously as he gave his order. "Anything I can do?"

"No, thanks. The lady will be all right in a minute. A sudden dizzy spell."

Marie was sitting upright when he returned, her eyes following his every movement.

"Drink this—it will make you feel better." He placed one of the cups in front of her, then sat himself down in the seat opposite.

She obeyed, still looking at him over the rim of her cup. Her trembling left hand plucked ineffectually at her disarranged hair.

"Why were you trying to contact me just now?" she asked. "Are you someone I should know?"

Keenan was struggling to understand this new development. The fact that Marie had been uninhibited meant that she must be associated in some way with Tern and Gregory. But what was she doing here? It was obvious that the mnemonic block placed in her mind by Pattin still existed—otherwise she would have recognised him.

"You knew me once," he said gently.

She peered into his face. "I don't understand. Your mind was not shielded before—do you have some control over your vibrator?"

"How did you get here, Marie?"

The corners of her mouth quivered. "The car . . . Lockyer's car . . . he left it outside the nursing home."

"Lockyer! Where is he?"

She replaced the cup in its saucer, a tremor shaking her whole body. "He's dead. Gregory killed him."

Cold horror gripped at Keenan's stomach muscles. "Where?"

"In the nursing home." She closed her eyes as if to blot out some painful vision. "It was my fault. I took him to

Gregory." She made a small sound of pain in her throat an infinitely pitiful sound. "Please . . . If you know me, you must help."

Keenan spoke softly and urgently. "Marie, I'm going to open my mind to you, to cut out all shielding. That means I shall be entirely in your hands."

She shook her head violently, her eyes still closed. "No ! I'm finished with it all. I can't take any more."

"Please, I'm dropping my shielding now," Keenan said. "I want you to come into my mind and find the truth." He cut his sub-voc and was immediately aware of the tremendous potential of her mind, withdrawn as it was. He reached across the table, touching her hand. "Please . . ."

Another moment of hesitation, and then she came to him. First a mere tendril, a searching, retreating sliver of awareness that asked: *Who?* Keenan willed a chain of memory to the surface of his mind; the moment of their meeting, the growth of their love for each other. The contact strengthened as one by one she assimilated his memories; each pattern of highly specialised protein molecules in his brain lightly touched a yielding, a facsimile of itself, which was transmitted back into her consciousness.

Keenan's mind tingled as the stimulation of her gentle probing went on . . . and then, gradually, tenderly withdrew. The whole process had taken less than thirty seconds, but he knew that her awareness of himself and his motives was now equal to his own.

Her eyes opened again. There was understanding and recognition in them now. "Pether !" She clutched at his hand. "Why couldn't you have told me everything before ? That night at the house ? No—that's a foolish question. I wouldn't have understood then. Gregory must be told—this senseless destruction must be stopped."

"Do you think he will listen ?" asked Keenan.

"I don't know. Your leader, Lockyer, was going to tell him, I'm sure. But he did not even have a chance to speak. Gregory killed him in cold blood."

"What *does* Gregory believe about us ?" Keenan asked.

"That you are the advance guard of an invading force, sent here to destroy the powers of the sensitives. He says that we are the only ones who can fight against you. Perhaps if I go back there I can make him understand the truth."

"Talk is no good—but if you could transfer the whole concept of our project to his mind telepathically he could not fail to understand."

"That is impossible with Gregory. His mind is opaque to mental communication."

"You mean that he is not a sensitive?" asked Keenan.

"Yes, but he will not let Tern operate on him. He says that his mind might be probed if he were a telepath." Marie hesitated, frowning slightly. "He is a strange, hard man. Sometimes I have the feeling that he hates we other sensitives almost as much as he does you Lessigians."

"Who else besides this Gregory and the people at the nursing home knows of the existence of the telepathic sensitives?"

"I believe he has contacts in the government. But the whole thing is top secret so far—they do not want to cause a panic amongst the normal population. What can we do, Pether? If Gregory does not believe, you will be unable to defend yourselves. Can't this conditioning be removed from your mind in some way?"

"Only by the machine that implanted it. Or by manipulation of the unconscious layers of our minds by the human equivalent of that machine . . ."

She recoiled. "A sensitive?"

Keenan nodded. "Yes, *you* could do it."

"Once, soon after the operation, when my powers were unfolding, I went too far into my own mind." She shuddered. "It was horrible, Pether. Normal surface thoughts and easily available memories are things that the mind can take—but the cess-pool of the unconscious . . ."

"It's the only way," pressed Keenan, hating himself for doing this thing to the girl. "Won't you at least try? At the moment we are helpless—and there is no one else I can ask."

She looked deep into his eyes. "I'm sorry, Pether. I was being a weak fool. When I remember how Lockyer walked in there to his death, and that two more of your friends have been killed, I can't refuse. If I *am* able to do it—what then?"

"All Gregory's contacts must be traced and the knowledge of our presence on Earth erased. Gregory and Tern must be convinced of the validity of our project, so that there will be no more uninhibition of sensitives. Earth is not ready for them."

"That is not going to be easy," said Marie. "And what about those like myself who have been uninhibited? There

must be nearly twenty of us now, and the numbers are growing every day as Gregory's men bring them into the nursing home."

"They will be asked to submit to re-inhibition," Keenan said. "They must be made to understand that this sacrifice is necessary for the safety of generations as yet unborn."

"I can understand that," Marie said. "But what if some of them are unwilling to give up this gift? There are bound to be some who value the advantage telepathy can give them in life. We are not all godlike, moral creatures, Pether."

Keenan avoided her eyes for a moment. "They cannot be allowed to wreck everything for their own selfish ends."

"You mean, you will use force, if necessary?"

He looked up at her. "Yes—if there is no alternative."

Their eyes locked for a long moment. Keenan realised that he was asking her a great deal. By removing the anti-violence conditioning she would be creating a possible menace to her race. Although she knew his mind and trusted him, the other Lessigians were still alien strangers.

"Very well, Pether," she said, at length.

He rose to his feet, looking down at her. "Thank you, Marie."

They walked out of the coffee bar arm in arm. Keenan knew that with her by his side, he could face whatever was to come with calm confidence.

XVI

Death was an old acquaintance of Ralph Tern. but he had never before appeared in such a violent, shattering manner. The surgeon was prepared to admit that they were battling for survival, but such ruthlessness as Gregory had shown in killing Lockyer was beyond his experience. The body had been removed now, and they were once more alone together in the large, luxuriously furnished study.

"I still cannot see why you had to kill him. We found no weapons on the body, and there was no reason to suppose that he came here for any hostile purpose." For the first time since Tern had known him the big man was showing signs of strain. His eyes shifted too quickly and his large hands showed a fine tremor.

"You must allow me to be the judge of that, Tern. I have studied these people for a long time."

"But perhaps he had come with some peace offer," pursued Tern. "They may have realised that with our growing resources they cannot hope to stand against us much longer."

"No—they would not give up so easily," said Gregory. "It was a trap."

"One man, unarmed and defenceless? At least you could have questioned him." Tern eyed the big man keenly. "Anyway, how were you so *sure* that he was one of them? You have no telepathic powers with which to check his identity."

Gregory slammed his hand on the desk top. "I told you! We have had them under observation for months, until their recent move. This man Lockyer was the head of their London group. Is it sensible to suppose that he came here totally alone and unprotected?"

"Couldn't you be wrong, just this once?" asked Tern. "After all, as far as we know they have never used any kind of violence—despite the fact that three of their number have been killed."

"Have you forgotten the kidnapping of Dashiell? He *must* be dead, or our sensitives would have contacted him before now. They put him out of the way, but then they found out that they were too late. *You*, with your ability to remove the inhibitors, are the one they are after now. And I intend to see that you remain alive, whether my methods meet with your approval or not."

"I still don't see how . . ."

"Remember the Birmingham incident," Gregory said. "With all the devices at their disposal it is impossible to know whether the man you see is actually what he appears to be. One of them impersonated me so perfectly that Jameson was entirely convinced."

"But that was part of the plan—you intended them to rescue Huizinger."

"Yes, but I did not anticipate the method. And then, afterwards, the whole scheme fell down because of that fool Shaun losing contact with the mind of the rescuer. If he had not panicked after the death of Huizinger we could have followed his rescuer back to London and the whole group would have been in our grasp."

"That was your own fault," protested Tern. "I warned you that the sanity of these sensitives is under a tremendous strain, even in the business of everyday living. They must be given time in which to re-orientate themselves. Shaun was not then ready for such an encounter."

"This is no time for kid glove methods," Gregory said. "We had to be ready for them when they moved, whatever the cost. We failed then, but it cannot be long before our network of sensitives contact them again—they must be hiding somewhere in the city."

There was a brief knock on the door and Hughes appeared. "The girl—she's gone !" he said, breathlessly.

"Gone? What do you mean?" snapped Tern. "I told you to place her under sedation over an hour ago."

"I did—I gave her the injection myself. But when I went into her room to check up just now, I found it empty."

Tern grimaced his annoyance. They knew so little about the changed workings of the sensitive mind. Reactions to drugs could possibly be quite different, and the girl was in a bad state of shock.

"Let her go—she's not important," Gregory said.

"Every human being is important," replied Tern forcefully. "In her state anything might happen. She must be found."

"One of the sensitives might be able to help," Hughes suggested.

"We have no one to spare," said Gregory flatly. "Shaun has not yet recovered and Delan and Mackay are needed to monitor reports from our cordon. We must not lose touch with them—the slightest break might be sufficient for the enemy to slip through unnoticed."

The buzzer on Gregory's intercom burst into life. He flipped the switch and listened for a moment. "This is what I have been waiting for." He rose to his feet and walked towards the door. "Roberts on the south-east section has made contact with some strong vibration which he has not yet identified."

"But the girl . . ." Tern said hopelessly.

"She will have to take care of herself for the time being." Gregory's lips were parted, slightly moist, showing his strong, white teeth.

Delan, who was acting as the receiving centre for the network of sensitives who were searching the city, lay on a couch in the darkened room on the third floor. His mental powers were stretched to their fullest extent as he scanned the radius of the contracting circle, receiving any messages transmitted by the searchers and translating them into clumsy, vocal terms. The strain of sifting the messages from the mass of

unintegrated vibration emanating from the minds of the city's population over such a large area was tremendous.

Mackay, a wiry little red-haired sensitive with a darkly freckled face, looked up as Gregory and his companion entered the room. "He's in contact with Roberts now."

"What is it? What has he found?" demanded Gregory.

"Getting closer . . . don't understand. Vibration is strong, but there seems no sense in the message . . . Just fear, and a feeling of pressure . . ." The blurred words tumbled from the writhing lips of the sensitive on the couch. "In front of the house now . . . strongest point. Must be inside, somewhere . . ."

"Tell him to go inside," Gregory said.

"No!" objected Tern. "It may be some kind of trap."

"Tell him to go inside!" insisted Gregory. "We *must* know."

There was a pause, then the sensitive spoke again: "Inside the house . . . Somewhere very close to me now . . . But there is still no coherence . . . A horrible sensation of pressure and fear, an anguish like that of a ch . . . That's it! *A Child!*"

Gregory cursed. "Tell him to get out of there and carry on with his search. He has been stalking an unborn, sensitive child."

"Moving away now, northwards . . ."

"Another false trail," said Gregory, disgustedly. "See if he can get the next in line—who is it?"

"Eisen," Mackay said. "He is about a mile away from Roberts."

"Get him, then!"

"You drive them too hard," protested Tern. Gregory's attitude towards the sensitives was brutal in the extreme at times, as if he regarded them as some inferior beings, instead of the evolutionary miracle that they were.

"We've been through all that," replied Gregory impatiently. "Time is short, Tern, and any minute they may be slipping away from under our fingers. Later there will be leisure for politeness. This is as much a war as any violence this planet has ever known—and these are my soldiers."

"Eisen . . ." The sensitive on the couch was speaking again. "Getting a strong interference pattern now, moving towards me . . . Trying to penetrate, but there is a heavy shield."

"It's one of them—it must be!" said Gregory, triumphantly
"Where is Eisen?"

". . . Queen Street, S.E.14 . . . Moving quickly towards me
now . . . Must be in a car . . ."

"Tell him to keep the Lessigian within detection range and
do nothing until further orders," Gregory said.

Delan twisted his head, his forehead was shiny with sweat.
"Understood . . . Has just spotted a black Ford saloon
moving northward on Queen Street. Vibration seems to be
coming from it . . ."

"Tell him to follow and keep monitoring." Gregory turned
to Mackay. "Get on the other couch and try to contact the
others. I want Delan to stay with Eisen, we mustn't lose this
one."

Gregory paced the floor as Mackay stretched himself out
and began to go through a relaxation procedure, preparatory
to reaching out with his mind, groping through the roiling
interference of the city towards the other sensitives in the
cordon.

"What are you going to do?" asked Tern.

"I'll have the others in the section move in on Eisen so
that we can keep this one boxed in," said Gregory tensely.

Mackay shifted on the couch. "I'm getting Portal on the
west side. He says he has contacted something too . . . a
tightly shielded mind moving in his direction."

Gregory slammed a big fist into his open palm. "They're
making a break for it! The must have spotted us getting
close to their headquarters."

"Portal requires instructions . . . vibration is approaching
him fast now . . ." said Mackay.

"Tell him to keep with it. Does he know how many?"

"He's not sure . . . The shielding is much stronger than
anything he has yet encountered, but he thinks there is only
one person . . ."

Gregory turned to the surgeon. "How many sensitives
have we in that area?"

"Besides Portal?" said Tern. "There'll be Staples,
Leinster and Bromfield."

"Right! Tell them all to move in on the trail Portal is
following. Got that, Mackay?"

"Understood," replied the sensitive. "I'm trying to get
them now."

"That is two of them," Gregory said, half to himself. "Now, where are the others? What are they doing?"

"Do you think it's wise to use four of our sensitives to track one of them in this way?" asked Tern. "We're spread pretty thinly now. If there are others at large we ought to keep some kind of a cordon."

"No! If we can keep a tight rein on these two they should lead us to the others—I can't take a chance on losing them."

Mackay spoke again from the couch. "I'm getting Roberts again . . . He says he has located something else and is moving in to identify . . . Just a minute . . . Yes, he says it's the girl, Marie . . . She is withholding from contact, though . . ."

"Damn the girl!" exploded Gregory. "Tell him to forget about her and join Eisen and the others."

"But he says that there is someone else with the girl . . . a mind shielded by a vibrator pattern . . ."

"What?" Gregory froze, his face stricken. "She must be with one of *them*. Cancel previous instructions. Tell him to investigate further." His fists were clenching and unclenching as he waited.

"Yes . . . it's the girl, all right . . . But she is still withholding from contact . . . He recognizes her pattern . . ." Another dragging period of silence, then! "He has them in sight now . . . They have just got out of a car in front of a block of flats . . ."

"What flats, damn you? Where?" snarled Gregory. "Who is she with?"

"Narcombe Mansions, near the junction of Queen Street and Park Way. The man is tall, with dark, thinning hair . . ."

Gregory's face was heavy with brooding fury. "Tell him to follow up with Eisen."

"I don't understand. You said for . . ." Mackay protested.

"You don't have to understand," shouted Gregory. "Just do as I say. Tell him to leave the girl and follow up with Eisen and the others." He paused. "No, listen to me, both of you. Tell all your contacts that orders have been changed. They are no longer purely observational; they are to go on monitoring their subjects, but as soon as a shield falters for the slightest second they are to blast to kill. *To kill*—remember! Impress on them that it is not safe to make any kind of contact with the enemy."

Gregory turned abruptly and headed out of the room. The little surgeon shot a bewildered look at the two sensitives on the couches, then hurried after him.

He caught up with Gregory at the door of his office and followed him inside. The big man's face was grim and withdrawn as he hurried to his desk and flung open a drawer. He removed the gun with which he had killed Lockyer.

"What are you going to do?" asked the surgeon. "Why did you suddenly change the orders for the sensitives to kill the Lessigians they are following? There might be some mistake, some terrible accident."

"Don't get in my way, little man," boomed Gregory. "There's no time to explain now. Just stay here and make sure that the sensitives carry out my orders—I'll be back."

"But where are you going?"

"To take care of the girl and whoever is with her. I've been waiting for this chance for years and I don't intend to let that little fool wreck the whole thing." He stormed out of the room and headed for the stairs.

XVII

Keenan and Marie left Lockyer's car in the courtyard and hurried into the apartment building. The girl leaned heavily on his arm as they entered the elevator.

"I'm frightened, Pether." There were dark shadows under her heavy lidded eyes as she looked up at him.

"Don't be, Marie." His arm was about her. "Now I've found you there is a chance for all of us."

"But the others . . . your friends . . ."

"They are just ordinary men like me," he reassured her. "Please try not to think of them in terms of Gregory's nightmare invaders."

The lift doors opened and he supported her along the corridor. The door of the flat was locked and Keenan punched the buzzer impatiently.

After what seemed an unending delay the door was opened by Warnock, his shirt collar unfastened and his face pale. There was a gun in his hand.

"Pether! We thought they had got you." He eyed Marie sharply. "Who is this?"

"The person we need—a sensitive," Keenan said. He pushed through the door, dragging Marie with him. "This

is Marie, Warnock. I dropped my shielding and she has probed my mind. You can talk freely in front of her; she knows as much about the project as I do." He pointed to the gun. "What's the idea of that thing?"

Warnock looked down at the weapon. "For me," he said simply. "I may not be able to defend myself, but I can still choose my own way to die."

"That may not be necessary now," Keenan said. "Give me a hand, will you?" Between them they helped the listless figure of Marie into the lounge and laid her on the couch. Keenan looked round the room enquiringly. "Where are the others?"

"Gone," said Warnock. "We decided that it was the only way. We located Gregory's sensitives on the Vion, closing in on us. Fulby and Megoran went off alone in different directions to try and draw them off."

"Why didn't you go?"

"This communicator is too much of a shoe-string gadget to move around, and I was still trying to make contact with the relief ship."

"You *were* still trying—does that mean you've reached them?"

Warnock nodded. "Yes—soon after Fulby and Megoran left. I contacted them just after they dropped out of hyper-drive outside the orbit of Pluto."

"But they weren't due for another month—what happened?"

"There's something new—a change of plan. The operator didn't have the authority to give me full details. But he said that Anrael had them. In any case, we couldn't talk long, the communicator blew out soon after I contacted them."

"Anrael?" Keenan frowned.

"Yes, home base called him several days ago and gave him new instructions to pass on to Lockyer. He must have been killed before he could do so."

"How long before the relief ship lands?" asked Keenan.

"They can't possibly make it under twenty-four hours. I don't see how we can hold out that long."

"There *is* a chance now." Keenan looked down at Marie.

"How do you feel?"

"I'll try, Pether," she said.

Keenan turned to Warnock again. "If Marie can remove my conditioning now I may be able to save the others. What did you arrange with them? I've got Lockyer's car outside with the Vion."

"They'll just keep running until they can shake the sensitives off," Warnock said. "They won't come back here until they have done that."

"That's a very slim chance—but I may be able to help. In the meantime Marie can stay here with you." He seated himself in an armchair opposite the girl. "Ready, darling?" he asked, looking into her eyes.

This was the moment Marie had been steeling herself for ever since the conversation in the coffee bar. Her body was aching and her head contained a dull red fire which seemed to be burning at her sanity. But she must not fail Pether now.

Closing her eyes, she forced herself to relax. Within her something was cringing, recoiling from the imagined horror. It was as if her very mind was attempting to slip away from her grasp into the comfort of dissociation.

With an effort of will she forced out a probing tendril of thought and contacted the open mind of Pether. Immediately a warmth of reassurance and love flowed back as he sensed her presence.

Don't worry darling. This will all be over soon and then we can be together.

I'm trying, Pether, probing deeper and deeper into your mind. How can you trust me to do this? I may wreck your sanity . . . I'm groping in the dark here . . .

No, darling. I trust you. Go on . . .

Despite his reassurance she was meeting more resistance now, as his mind contracted reflexly, trying to protect its shrouded darkness. She was battering now against the natural barrier which enclosed his unconscious mind. She tried again, forcing her thought into a sharp pattern, like a scalpel of mental energy.

And she was through the barrier. It was as if the membrane on some huge bladder of corruption had suddenly burst and its contents engulfed her. Reason tottered as she fought to maintain the identity of her thought in the face of the dynamic gnawing, the suffocating horror of twisted and distorted suppressed memory that was the inferno of Keenan's unconscious.

Somewhere here lay the thing she sought. Fighting back her growing revulsion she forced herself to explore the slimy corridors of association to their ultimate end, one after the other. Here was the very stuff of madness; the side of Keenan's personality which was forever a closed book to the man him-

self. Her greatest difficulty was to keep reminding herself that the distortions of fantasy boiled and mingled here had no true relationship with the mind of the man she loved, other than that of parasitism.

She was nearing the knife edge of her tolerance when, twisted and mingled in dreadful imagery, she became aware of a repititive command, closely woven into a feedback circuit so that it came again and again like a closed loop of tape on a recorder. Although artificially induced, it had grown inwards until it was an integral part of the whole mad gestalt.

More carefully now, knowing that the slightest mistake on her part could entirely destroy the barrier and end in madness for Keenan, she unleashed some of the energy of her mind. It flowed outwards, burning and cauterising, cutting away selectively at the command and its associative paths. At one moment she feared that the disturbance she was causing had set up a chain reaction in the substance of his mind, but the fire died, leaving only mental scar tissue where the command had been.

She withdrew, disciplining herself to prevent the screaming retreat which her consciousness demanded, with tortuous caution. Away, back within herself her thoughts came back to an awareness of her own pain and weariness. Now above all, she wanted rest—some cool peace, away from conflict. But now she was once more aware of her own body, of its aching rebellion. Even the pressure of the couch upon which she lay was a torture.

She forced herself to open her eyes again as she heard Pether speak her name. Thank heaven! She had left him alive and sane. He was bending over her, his face full of concern.

"Marie! I should not have asked you to do this."

"Who else?" she smiled up at him.

He turned now, his image blurring in her pain-filled eyes and she heard him say: "Take care of her, Warnock. I must go now."

"Good luck, Pether . . ." Marie's lips formed the words soundlessly as her consciousness tottered over the brink into oblivion.

Somewhere, heard from the bottom of a deep well, she heard the sound of a door opening. And with that small sound came the awakening of her, as feeling and awareness

flowed down a million million neural circuits. There was light of her eyelids. She was lying on a bed, there was soft comfort and the promise of more oblivion at hand . . . infinitely dear oblivion.

She forced her eyes open, and found herself looking at the ceiling cornice of a strange room. Lifting herself on one elbow, she looked across the room.

The big, confident figure of Gregory walked to the foot of the bed and stood looking at her enigmatically.

"You found me!" she said, hope surging. Now perhaps there was a chance. "We've made a terrible mistake."

"A mistake?" He raised one eyebrow. "No, my dear, it is you who have made the mistake. But it is not important."

"The Lessigians are not what we believed. Not invaders—they are here to help us."

"Indeed? How do you know this?"

"Keenan opened his mind to me. I have full knowledge of their project."

"I was afraid of that," Gregory said. "You should have stayed at the nursing home where you were safe, instead of interfering in things which you do not understand."

"But I *do* understand . . . everything," she protested. "Let me explain to you."

"Not *everything*, Marie. But the game will soon be over. The sensitives are closing in on the Lessigians now. One false move, one slight break in their shielding will be sufficient to allow their obliteration."

"No! You've got to stop them. Believe me, they are here to help us."

"Possibly . . ." His voice was silky smooth. "Where is Keenan?"

"He has gone to bring the others back here."

"Why should he do that?" asked Gregory.

She strained forward. "Don't you see? They are *not* what you believe them to be. He is bringing them here because through me he will be able to contact the other sensitives and tell them the truth."

"That would be foolish. He would be walking right into the centre of our forces."

"You've *got* to believe me. They were placing the inhibitors in the minds of sensitives to protect them."

"Is that likely?" The flicker of a smile played about his strong mouth. "Protect them from what?"

"They believe that the normals would persecute us if they knew of our talents." She stopped, remembering Warnock in the next room. "The other one . . . is he still here? He will explain to you."

"I'm afraid not," Gregory said. "I was forced to eliminate him when I arrived."

Her hand moved to her throat as she looked up at him, this man who crushed obstacles in his path like some gigantic, ponderous tank. "You . . . killed him?"

"Of course. I explained to you before, Marie. This is a battle for the freedom of our planet. They must *all* be killed if we are to survive."

He did not, he *would* not believe her. His fanaticism was such that he would ignore anything she said. The thought grew on her like a tide of enveloping despair.

"Gregory, I beg of you," she stammered brokenly. "Call one of the other sensitives and have him probe my mind. He will tell you that I am speaking the truth."

"The truth as you know it, perhaps." He slid a hand into his inside breast pocket and drew out a small, black leather-covered case. "These aliens have considerable powers of hypnotism and other types of suggestion. You know that from your own experience."

"What do you mean?" Her eyes were on the object in his hand. There was something dreadfully familiar about it.

"Your relationship with Keenan. Surely you haven't forgotten that it was blotted out of your consciousness by one of them?"

"You knew about that?"

"Of course—your background was fully investigated before you were operated on," Gregory said. "Hasn't it occurred to you that if they could do that to you, there might be other ways in which they could influence your attitude towards them?"

She was almost doubting herself now, floundering in the mass of contradictions. "I don't believe you. I probed Keenan's mind, I tell you. He laid himself wide open to me."

"Do you really believe that he would?" sneered Gregory. "I realised when I had you operated on that you would have no stomach for the more brutal side of this conflict. But I thought that your past connection with Keenan might be of some use." He moved closer. "I was right."

He opened the black case and produced a small, shining instrument. She *had* seen something like it before—in Keenan's hands the night Judy's baby was born. "What are you going to do now?" she whispered, her lungs seemed bursting with tension.

"Nothing very serious, my dear. But you will be safer with one of these implanted in your mind again. It will remove the temptation to do anything which might upset my plans."

The strain, the horror and her fatigue built up to one huge, mind-blasting chord . . . and she pitched forward into unconsciousness.

XVIII

Keenan drove swiftly through the gathering darkness of the city. He glanced down at the Vion detector which lay on the seat beside him. A pulsating spiral of light appeared at the very edge of the screen.

He accelerated dangerously, weaving through the traffic, then jammed his brakes on impatiently at a red light. He was moving forward again, there was less traffic now and the road was a wide highway leading to the edge of the city. On his left he noticed the flaring, coloured lights of a greyhound racing stadium. The car park in front of the stadium was parked with hundreds of vehicles and a race meeting was in progress.

Keenan looked at the Vion again. Another pulsating light swam into view, followed by yet another. He was gaining on them. He checked his sub-voc screening and accelerated again.

A tiny blip of light appeared at the top of the screen. The sensitives were strung out along the road ahead of him about a quarter of a mile away—and Megoran was perhaps a half mile ahead of them.

A roundabout loomed and he jammed on his brakes. Swerving round on screeching tyres he managed to hold the twisting wheel until he was once more on the straight. He glanced at the detector again.

The situation had changed abruptly. Megoran was back-tracking. His tracer-blip headed swiftly towards the centre of the screen, passing the sensitives. Keenan pulled into the side of the road and stopped. There was a flash of headlights

and a low-slung black car roared past him, with Megoran hunched over the wheel.

Keenan backed onto the grass verge, just as three cars almost nose to tail, passed him. The sensitives were so intent on their quarry that they had not even noticed the vibration of his own sub-voc.

He pulled out onto the road again and followed. What was Megoran doing? By turning back into the city he would be moving further into the net of the sensitives. He glanced at the detector again. The three lights of the sensitives and Megoran's dot were in full view.

Megoran's trace stopped moving abruptly. The sensitives were closing in on him fast. They were off the road, having turned into the car park of the greyhound racing stadium. Megoran's blip was moving again, but slowly. He had abandoned his car and was now travelling on foot. How could he possibly hope to shake off his pursuers that way?

Keenan turned his car into the park and coasted slowly between the packed lines of cars. Through the open window he heard the roar of the crowd from inside the enclosure. Ahead of him, a man in a white raincoat came out of an exit and headed towards the lights of the Underground Station. Near to the main entrance a group of people were gathered round a low-slung, black car—Megoran's.

Three of them separated from the group and walked towards the turnstiles of the stadium. A glance at the Vion showed Keenan that they were the sensitives. Megoran was moving very slowly now. Keenan guessed that the crowd inside the stadium would hamper his movements.

Megoran's tracer-blip suddenly disappeared and Keenan realised what the man was trying to do. Megoran had deliberately shut off his sub-voc, so that the emanations of his mind would be no different from those of the other people in the stadium. It was a desperate chance, but it just might succeed. There were far too many people in the stadium for the sensitives to probe the minds of them all, and Megoran was now entirely unprotected, but untraceable except by a detailed probe. If he could manage to control his surface thoughts efficiently it was possible that he could survive a brief scanning, which was all the sensitives would have time to do. But the odds were very high that amongst all those people he might be spared even that. All cats are black at night.

Keenan sat in the darkened car considering. Megoran might be safe for the time being—but surely he was thinking further ahead than that. His car was abandoned, in the hands of the sensitives. What did he hope to do after the racing was finished and the crowd which was his protection melted away again? Unless he moved with the crowd. Inside the stadium there would be several tunnels leading to the Underground station, through which the thousands who packed the stadium would surge after the meeting. That *must* be Megoran's plan of escape.

Keenan looked at his watch. It would probably be another half hour before the racing finished. If he went into the station now and loitered about he would be too conspicuous. He would wait until just before the end.

He was afraid that sooner or later his sub-voc would attract the attention of the sensitives. With a muttered prayer he cut it—nothing happened. For the moment he was safe.

The long wait began. Deliberately Keenan forced his mind away from the events with which it was preoccupied, in case one of the sensitives should happen to casually scan his mind. He had a bad shock at one point when he looked up to find a man in a loudly checked jacket and a cap peering down at him through the car window. But the man only wanted a lift, and went away muttering to himself when Keenan told him that he was going in the opposite direction to the one he required.

At last Keenan slid the car door open and stepped outside and strolled with a carefully normal pace towards the Underground entrance. He felt naked and exposed inside the brilliantly lit booking hall, but he walked over to one of the ticket machines and dropped in his coins. Making his way down the escalator, he stationed himself near the entrance to the city-bound platform and lit a cigarette.

A train roared into the station and its doors hissed open. A knot of people appeared at the head of the stairs and began hurrying downwards. These would be the cautious ones who walked out before the end of the last race in order to avoid the crush. Megoran would not be amongst them, he was safe in the crowd.

Then somewhere above the dam broke, people surged through the barrier and onto the escalator. Keenan looked upwards, scanning the cataract of faces as they poured downwards.

Megoran was about halfway down when he saw him, his shoulders hunched in an old sacklike raincoat. Keenan raised his hand, but there was no response. The other was obviously intent upon maintaining a covering thought-stream, withdrawn from the events around him.

He stepped off the bottom of the stairs only a few yards away, still oblivious of Keenan's presence. A sudden encounter with Keenan might cause him to broadcast a wave of surprise which the sensitives would detect. Keenan followed Megoran onto the city-bound platform, keeping his head in sight through the moving people. There was a rush of air through the tunnel and the sound of an approaching train. The crush surged back from the platform edge, then forward again as the train rattled in and the doors hissed open.

Keenan managed to push into the same carriage as Megoran and the train started to move away with a jerk, gathering speed. He waited a few minutes, then made a quick sub-voc sweep. There was no response. It seemed that Megoran had shaken off the sensitives for the time being. Keenan made his way towards Megoran, through the standing passengers. The stocky man's eyes widened in surprise as he looked up and saw him.

Keenan bent over and shouted in Megoran's ear over the racket of the train. "Nice going ! That needed a lot of nerve. We can use our sub-vocs again now, for the time being. I just checked and we're all clear."

"I never thought I'd see this place again," said Megoran, unlocking the front door of the flat. They walked into the hallway. The place seemed very quiet, with a tense, waiting atmosphere . . .

"Warnock !" called Keenan. He pushed open the lounge door and stopped abruptly. A large man, whom he recognised as Gregory, was seated comfortably in an armchair with his legs crossed. A gun was held lightly in his right hand.

"Come in, Keenan," Gregory said smoothly. "I've been looking forward to this meeting."

"Where is Marie ?"

"Don't worry about her for the moment." The gun rose steadily. "Come in—I said."

Keenan heard Megoran's smothered gasp behind him. "*Anrael* ! What are you doing here ? I thought you were . . ."

"Dead ? That is what you were intended to think."

Gregory—Anrael; Keenan struggled to evaluate the situation and came up with nothing but queries.

"But whose body was found in Birmingham?" asked Megoran.

"Dashiell, of course," Gregory replied smoothly. "He became too curious. And further, I needed the freedom of movement that being 'dead' would give me. I knew that Tern would be able to supply me with other sensitives when I needed them."

"To smash the project," Megoran said. "But why?"

"Because that is why I was planted in the original group," said Anrael. "I was not subjected to the anti-violence conditioning, but that was merely for my own protection. We knew that sooner or later some opportunity would arise to destroy the project and make it seem the work of Earth people. The surgical skill of Tern provided that opportunity."

"But your own race . . . Huizinger, Lockyer."

"Was an idealistic fool, like the others of his party," spat Anrael contemptuously. "Lessigia stands at the moment, the supreme humanoid race in the galaxy. Why should we help these savages with their telepathic gifts to take our place?"

"But you have not destroyed the project entirely," Keenan said. "And the relief ship arrives tomorrow night."

Anrael nodded confidently. "I am well aware of that. Although I'm afraid I shall be the only one to whom it will be of practical interest."

"You intend to kill us?"

"Naturally," said Anrael. "I shall return to the ship alone and state quite truthfully that I am the sole survivor of our group. I shall explain that one of the native surgeons discovered a means of removing the inhibitors and that the sensitives found out about the project. It is quite natural that such an innately unstable race should react by attacking us."

It was plausible, damnably so, thought Keenan. The supreme council would have no wish to involve themselves further in such a conflict and would undoubtedly abandon the project.

Anrael eyed Megoran, who was edging steadily forward, his heavy body tense. "Don't be a fool! The conditioning would drop you before you laid a hand on me."

This diversion of Anrael's attention was the chance Keenan had been waiting for. He darted forward low, smashing up-

wards on Anrael's gun hand with his right arm. The gun discharged, a bullet smashing into the plaster on the other side of the room. Anrael was hampered by the sitting position he had adopted in his confidence that he could easily handle two conditioned men.

He kicked out, his feet scoring brutal hits on Keenan's slim body. But Keenan hung onto his gun arm and managed to wrest the weapon from his grasp. He backed away, with the gun trained on Anrael.

The big man was plainly bewildered by the sudden assault, his face bloodless. But he recovered quickly.

"Don't be a fool, Keenan," he said, rising cautiously from the chair. "The conditioning will not allow you to kill me." He reached out a hand. "Give me back the gun!"

"No!" Keenan held the weapon steady. "I warn you—my conditioning has been removed. Keep back!"

"A nice try. But you can't bluff me." Anrael moved slowly forward, tensing himself. "Only a Grenbach Integrator could do that, and there is not one within a light year of this planet."

"Get back—or I'll shoot!" grated Keenan. The big man was almost on top of him.

"Don't be a fool, Keenan. I can . . ." Anrael grabbed for the gun.

Keenan jumped quickly backwards, maintaining his balance, and fired. Anrael reeled back into the chair, clutching unbelievably at his left forearm, from which the blood was already beginning to seep.

"I gave you fair warning," Keenan said. "Don't try that again. My aim might not be so good next time."

Anrael's face twisted with pain and rage. "How . . . ?"

"Marie probed my mind and removed the conditioning."

"That damned girl!" cursed Anrael. "She'll be of no further use to you, anyway. I re-inhibited her."

Keenan felt a growing coldness in the pit of his stomach. It was all that he could do to prevent himself from pulling the trigger again and killing Anrael. But he must not do that—the traitor might still be their passport to escape.

He turned to Megoran. "Go and see if you can find Marie."

The stocky man nodded and left the room hurriedly.

"You'll never get away, Keenan." Anrael spoke through clenched teeth, nursing his injured arm. "The sensitives are closing in, and they have orders to kill."

"Then I shall try to fight my way out," said Keenan. "But rest assured—I shall save one bullet for you."

Megoran reappeared in the doorway. "She's in the bedroom, Pether," he said worriedly. "In pretty bad shape. She needs advanced psycho-therapy to pull her out of a withdrawal state like that."

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"The only thing I can do is to give her a sedative," said Megoran. "I'm going to get a hypo from the bathroom now."

"Just how bad *is* she?" Keenan asked anxiously.

Megoran avoided his eyes. "She'll have to have proper treatment soon. Otherwise she will automatically fall into a catatonic state that will be hard to break. The shock of inhibition again, on top of the other strains she has gone through, has shattered her integration."

"Then we've *got* to reach that relief ship," Keenan said grimly. "They will have therapy instruments capable of dealing with such a case."

"For God's sake get me something for this arm," Anrael said, looking down at his sodden jacket sleeve. "I'm bleeding to death."

"That's too comfortable for you," snarled Megoran, and hurried away.

XIX

"She's sleeping now," said Megoran, re-entering the room.

"Thanks," Keenan said, looking up. He pointed to Anrael who was still hunched in the chair. "Better see what you can do for that arm of his, will you? We may need him later."

"Just a minute!" Megoran hurried across the room to the Vion detector which lay on a table in the corner. He gazed down at it for a moment in silence, then turned, his broad face pale. "Take a look at this!"

Keenan rose and walked across to the detector. The pulsating lights of two sensitives were approaching the centre of the screen.

"They've found us," Megoran said. "What do we do now? You can't use the girl to contact them."

"We can still get through." Keenan turned, looking at Anrael.

The big man moved painfully. "For God's sake . . . this arm!"

"The only way would be to use sub-voc and that would be suicide," Megoran said.

"Perhaps," said Keenan grimly. He walked across and stood looking down at Anrael. "Drop your sub-voc screening!"

The big man's eyes widened in horror. "No! You can't make me do that. That's what they're waiting for. They'll think I'm one of you, and kill me."

"And I'll kill you if you don't," said Keenan coldly.

"But they don't know I have a sub-voc," protested Anrael.

"You'll have to identify yourself immediately—tell them who you are before they have a chance to blast you."

"But they won't wait. The slightest break . . ." Anrael's forehead was moist, his lips bloodless. "What good will it do?"

"It may save lives—lives more deserving than your own," said Keenan harshly. "Contact them and establish your identity. Then if you are still alive you can say that we wish to parley with them. Tell them that we wish no violence, but if they try to attack us in any way we shall kill you."

"No—I won't do it." Anrael's lips writhed.

"I'll give you the count of ten." Keenan raised the gun, pointing it at Anrael's temple. "One . . . Two . . . Three . . ."

Keenan had no desire to kill the man in cold blood like this, to slaughter him like some animal. Anrael had no choice—it only amounted in effect to the choice of the method of his dying, but Keenan was gambling on the fact that a reprieve, however short, is worthwhile to a man faced with imminent death.

"Four . . . Five . . ."

Megoran had risen from the Vion and was standing tensed, watching the man in the chair. "Do as he says, Anrael. This is no bluff."

"Six . . . Seven . . . Eight . . ." Keenan's finger tightened on the trigger. "Nine . . ."

"All right! All right!" Anrael broke. He lay quivering in the chair. "I'll try—there's just a chance they may listen."

"And if they don't, you'll die as you caused Huizinger to die," said Keenan softly. There was a bleak justice in the concept. "Do you understand the message? You're to tell them to come here—that we are willing to talk terms with them."

Anrael nodded, quivering. "Just give me a moment to compose my thoughts."

"They're getting very close," said Megoran. "They must be in the lift now."

"Hear that, Anrael?" Keenan's voice was hard. "There's no time to lose. And no tricks . . . I would dearly love to kill you."

Anrael closed his eyes, the muscles of his face twitching.

Keenan stood immobile, watching. Waiting for the moment of convulsion and death that would mean contact had been made . . . and had failed.

Anrael's breathing that had been quick and shallow, changed its note and became more steady. They waited for explosion did not come. On now, twenty seconds . . . thirty. A full minute.

Keenan steeled his chattering nerves and prepared for the final gamble. He knew that he could not trust Anrael, but he had been forced to use him as a guinea pig to test the reaction of the sensitives.

With infinite caution he began to cut his own shielding pattern. Down gradually, fraction by fraction, ready at any moment to re-erect it; but at the same time doubting if he would have the ability should one of the sensitives pour the full force of his mental power in his direction.

It was there now—the pulsating vibration of the sensitives which he had come to recognize. He tensed himself for the rush of power that would blast the life from his body.

"*You must kill them, Shaun. I will tell them that you are willing to talk and have them open the door of the flat. You've got to, Shaun. They plan to rob you of the powers I have given you. They are aliens—your enemies . . .*" Anrael was communicating with the sensitives, but he was attempting to twist the situation to his own advantage.

Keenan had feared this. He prepared to transmit himself. Then stopped as an immense ripple of vibration flowed over him, like some godlike voice :

"*No. The time has passed when we take orders from you, Gregory—if that is your name.*" There was a tone of disgust and loathing. "*You can have no conception what it is like to plunge your consciousness into that of another being and then to obliterate him. You made me do that once—and in doing so I killed part of myself. But not again.*"

"*You must !*" protested Anrael. "*They are waiting here with weapons. As soon as you open the door they will kill you. These are your enemies . . .*"

"*We have no trust for you now, Gregory. You lied to us about your own powers.*"

"*I can explain . . . everything. But you must kill them.*"

"*No. We have decided that we must meet these enemies at last. You have always prevented that, for some reason of your own . . .*"

"*In order to protect you . . . Trust me,*" persisted Anrael.

"*We can protect ourselves.*" There was an enormous aura of confidence contained in the thought. "*Tell them to open the door of the flat.*"

Keenan re-erected his sub-voc shield, as Anrael stirred and opened his eyes.

"You must use your gun if you are to survive, Keenan," he said. "They will not listen to me."

"Get up, Anrael," said Keenan coldly, despising the man's treachery.

"Why? What are you going to do?" Anrael asked, quivering.

"You can open the door and welcome your friends," said Keenan, the gun trained steadily on Anrael. "Get up !"

Anrael rose painfully. "That will put me in the line of fire," he protested.

Keenan pushed the gun into the small of Anrael's back. "Move !" He spoke over his shoulder to Megoran. "Stay in here—there's nothing else you can do at the moment." They moved out into the hallway of the flat, towards the door.

"Look out, Keenan !" Anrael shouted and twisted away, moving his large body with surprising agility. His uninjured hand came round swiftly and snatched at the gun.

But he was not quick enough. Keenan, tensed and wiry, was ready for him. Raising the gun high, he smashed it down with all his strength on Anrael's skull.

The big man made a choking sound and slumped at his feet. Keenan continued towards the door, and opened it with a swift movement.

"You can put that weapon away," said Shaun, his hollow eyed, beaked face calm. There were three other men with him. One Keenan recognised as Doctor Tern, another sandy-haired little man, and . . .

"It's all right, Pether. They know all about us . . . *all*," said Fulby, stepping forward.

"How do you come to be here—with them?" asked Keenan.

"We decided that we had had our fill of killing," Shaun pointed down at the prostrate body of Anrael. "This one gained our allegiance by lies, but discussing together after he had left we decided to find out the truth about the enemy for ourselves."

"They picked me up on the outskirts of the city," said Fulby. "Two cars blocking the road and one behind. I thought I was finished, and decided to take the chance of opening my mind to them." Fulby looked down at Anrael. "I thought he was dead. I was sure they were mistaken when they said that they recognised the image of him that they found in my memory. I never even suspected that *he* might be behind this horrible business."

"It was a long-term plan," said Keenan. "The non-interventionists planted him in the project at its very inception, pushing through false psyche data and arranging that he should miss the standard conditioning."

"I was a fool to believe him," said Tern, softly. "I should have known the true purpose of the inhibitors."

"Don't blame yourself for that," said Keenan. "You could hardly have been expected to guess the truth in the face of his plausible lies. Our one great aim was to prevent the existence of the sensitives from becoming known to the rest of the population. That would have been disastrous in such a culture pattern as yours."

"I found that part difficult to believe at first," said Shaun. "But now I am beginning to understand."

"And you and the others are willing to submit to re-inhibition?" asked Keenan quietly, aware that on this question would rest the entire future of the project.

"I cannot answer that immediately," said Shaun gravely. "Such a sacrifice demands much consideration."

Keenan found himself in sympathy with the sensitive. He remembered his own qualms about the placing of the inhibitors even when he had been working upon minds who had not yet the maturity to understand the telepathic power. To ask these people to give it up was like asking a man to submit voluntarily to an operation which would render him blind.

"Our relief ship is scheduled to land tomorrow night," he said. "Then we shall be able to make contact with our superiors at home base. I'm sure we shall be able to make some compromise."

"You have contacted the relief?" asked Fulby eagerly.

"Yes, Warnock spoke to them shortly after you left here," said Keenan.

"The girl, Marie—what happened to her?" asked Tern.

"She is in the bedroom here. But I am afraid there is nothing you can do for her, doctor. I shall take her to the relief ship. They will have the facilities to treat her."

"And Gregory . . . Anrael?"

"I propose to take him back to the relief ship, as well. What will happen to him remains in the hands of my superiors"

"He is a murderer," said Tern.

"In his own eyes, a patriot," said Keenan. "We have the therapy methods which can render him a useful member of society." He turned to Shaun. "Are you prepared to allow us to return to our ship?"

The eyes of the sensitive were misted, withdrawn. Once again it was brought home forcibly to Keenan that these people, for all their outwardly human appearance, would always be a race apart, a group of strangers with their own modes of life and moral attitudes. He guessed that at this moment Shaun was in contact with the others of his kind—their entire group knitted together into a group mind, which whilst retaining their individuality, gave them a power of integration which ordinary humans could never hope to attain.

"We have decided," said Shaun, at length, his eyes swimming into focus. "I shall come with you to your ship with the authority to speak for us all."

Anrael stirred on the floor and groaned.

Shaun glanced down at him, his face hawk-like and aloof. "Perhaps it would be better if I killed him now. But then I would be no more than he is. It is best that your people should gain the whole story from him; then they are more likely to understand our position and help us."

"Help you?" Keenan was puzzled by the change of attitude.

Shaun nodded. "One of us has just learned that the morning papers are carrying a story warning the people of Earth that a race of mental monsters is loose amongst them. We are the monsters, to whom they refer. Gregory may win in the end, after all."

Keenan was incredulous. "This is madness! What good would it do Gregory to release such a story at this stage?"

"It would serve the purpose for which he has been working," said Shaun. "This was the culmination of his treachery to both of our races."

"But no one will believe this story," said Keenan. "It will be passed off as a newspaper hoax."

"I think not," said Shaun. "It is well prepared and offers a great deal of easily authenticated detail. The witch-hunt your people feared will shortly begin, Keenan. And the cause of it will be the actions of one of your own race. You can hardly forswear responsibility for us now, can you? We could fight, of course, but we have no stomach for that, not against our own kind; our faculties give us far too keen a sense of the sufferings of others . . ."

XX

Keenan sat in the car, cradling Marie's head in his arm. She had been unconscious throughout the whole drive across country to the rendezvous. Outside in the gathering dusk, Fulby and Shaun stood surveying the stubby grass of the salt marshes; looking out across to the flickering remains of an inglorious, cloud-robbed sunset. A chill seaborne wind raced across the marsh.

Marie moved closer towards him, instinctively seeking warmth. Then, as the movement broke in through the barriers of sleep, she opened her eyes. And screamed.

"It's all right, Marie." Keenan spoke urgently, holding the struggling, hysterical girl.

The scream subsided. The false dawn of madness glowed in her wide eyes. Squirming from his grasp she retreated to the other side of the car, her hands raised clawlike to defend herself.

"Who are you? Where are you taking me?"

"Shall I give her another hypo? It might be better," said Megoran, who was sitting in the front seat with Anrael.

The demented girl saw Anrael, and his face stirred some memory of horror in her racing mind. She began to scream again.

"No. I want her conscious when we take her into the ship. Just get Anrael out of here, he's bothering her."

"All right." Megoran turned to his prisoner. "You heard what he said—outside!"

Anrael obeyed sullenly. All hope was gone for him. Only the therapy chamber and a complete change of identity lay ahead. A death that was not a death.

It was almost midnight when the ship appeared. A flicker of brightness in the moonless, cloudy sky. Megoran opened the driving seat door and reached to the dashboard, flicking the lights of the car in a recognition signal.

The huge bulk of the ship hovered for a moment directly above them, then moved swiftly sideways and landed about a hundred yards away. A patch of light appeared on its side, quickly expanding as a port dropped downwards and formed a ramp leading to the ground.

Megoran opened the back door of the car and helped Keenan to lift out the limp, terrified form of Marie. Then together the party moved towards the ramp.

Members of the crew, in their light grey uniforms, hurried forward to help them aboard and a moment later they stood blinking in the sudden, bright illumination of the interior of the ship.

The commander of the ship, a tall Lessigian, with flaming red hair, and a friendly face, walked forward to meet them.

"Prede Vonne, Supreme Council Space Navy. I understand that you have been having trouble. Sorry we couldn't make Earth sooner—but your communications have been rather confusing."

"Place this man under close arrest, pending an investigation," said Fulby, pointing to Anrael. "Are you in contact with home base?"

The commander nodded.

"Just a minute, Fulby," said Keenan, pushing forward. "Commander, have I your permission to take this girl to your Sick Bay?"

The commander eyed him. "Is she a native?"

"No—a *human being*, and she needs therapy, quickly," snapped Keenan. He lifted Marie in his arms and walked through the gleaming corridors of the ship.

The M.O., a quietly efficient little man, with brown mobile features, listened as Keenan explained, then galvanised into action.

"There is nothing you can do here, at the moment," he said briskly. "Don't worry—I'll take care of her." He was working swiftly, affixing electrodes, their tiny needle ends

piercing through Marie's skull. "I shall have to make a full exploratory examination of her mind first. Then I may be able to tell you something."

Keenan, realising that he had been dismissed, turned away and headed back in the direction of the commander's office.

Fulby looked up from a sheaf of papers he had been studying as Keenan entered the room. "Now we know why Anrael suddenly stepped up operations," he said. "In that last call he received from home base he was given new orders for the project. Orders which would have taken the whole thing out of the sphere of influence which he had carefully built up through the years."

Shaun was sitting in the corner of the room. His face had that withdrawn expression Keenan had noticed earlier when the sensitive had been communicating with the others of his kind.

"Our party have at last persuaded the Supreme Council to make some more positive provision for the future of the sensitives," continued Fulby. "A whole, undeveloped Earth-type planet in the Medusa sector has been fully surveyed by Exploration Command and the council have voted for it to be placed at the exclusive disposal of the sensitives. We are prepared to offer them transport and the necessities with which to effect colonisation. Once there, they will be able to develop their own civilisation free from persecution, and without any interference from us.

"The Council have long been aware of the flaws in the present form of the project; that it only constituted a temporary measure and entailed unnecessary danger and deprivation for the sensitives. This way they will be able to live their own lives in the manner natural to them."

There was a boldness, a clean sweep about the concept that thrilled Keenan. But alongside that was alarm. Marie was a sensitive, and as such, a part of this new world.

"These sensitives may be a new race; but most of them were born from the loins of normal humans," he said. "They are the result of an evolutionary process. Even if all the sensitives existing on Earth today are removed, there will still be others born in the future. What is to happen to them?"

"They will be inhibited, as in the past. But only until they reach the age of eighteen," said Fulby. "They will then be contacted by one of our agents, who will tell them of the latent power of their minds and explain to them about the

Medusa colony. They will be given the choice of staying on Earth as inhibited sensitives for the rest of their lives, or of being uninhibited and transported to become part of the new colony's telepathically based culture."

Shaun moved slightly in his chair, and looked round the room. "I have told the others of the plan, and they agree. There are some of them who have wives and sweethearts amongst the normals—they want to know whether they will be allowed to take these people with them to the new planet if they are willing?"

Fulby's face was grave. "We have considered that, Shaun, and decided that it is not desirable."

"I see what you mean," said Shaun, thoughtfully. "This is to be an entirely new, clean start for them. There will be no place for non-telepaths. I wonder—can we really throw off old associations in this way?"

"You must," Fulby said. "If they are not willing to break entirely with their normal contacts here on Earth the only alternative is re-inhibition. If normals were to be introduced into the new colony there would be friction—the two races could not live together."

"Very well," said Shaun. "I will give them the alternative. I am sure they will understand."

The communicator on the commander's desk buzzed. Fulby switched it on and spoke quietly: "It's Valk, the ship's M.O. He wishes to speak to you, Keenan."

Keenan rose heavily to his feet. Fulby's interpretation of the orders with regard to the colony could mean only one thing. He had found Marie again, only to lose her. She would be going to the Medusan planet with the others. There she would be amongst her own kind, and he . . .

"Keenan?" said the voice of the M.O.

"Yes—what is it?"

"Why didn't you tell me more about this girl?" asked the M.O. sharply. "I'm not sure that I shall be able to do much for her, after the way you people must have been tampering with her mind."

Keenan's stomach tightened. "You've got to do something." His mind reeled with anguish at the thought of Marie spending the rest of her life in the twilight of insanity.

"Maybe you'd better go down there," said Fulby sympathetically.

Valk looked up as he entered the Sick Bay. Marie lay on a couch in front of a therapy machine, the top half of her skull entirely covered by a shining metal helmet from which a network of cables sprouted and led back to the contacts of the machine. Her face was calm and pale, eyes closed.

"You've got to help her, Valk." Keenan's voice rasped through his parched throat.

The M.O. shook his head gravely. "I don't think you quite understand. The placing of an inhibitor in the mind of a sensitive is in the first place a shock to the integration of that mind. Then there was the matter of surgical removal, which damaged certain important centres. This damage was remedied to some extent by the brain's own adaptive powers, only to be disrupted again by the clumsy placing of the second inhibitor."

"But what could be done once can be done again, surely?" Keenan was pleading, praying for some ray of hope.

Valk shook his head grimly. "No, Keenan. She is beyond the reach of my skill."

"Perhaps if she could be taken back to Lessigia . . ."

"No, Keenan. I am a specialist in these matters." Valk walked over to the couch and began to remove the helmet carefully from Marie's head. "Believe me, if there were anything I could do I would try. But to tamper further might mean death for her."

"But surely *that* would be better than to leave her like this?" Keenan said. "I'm sure she would want you to try."

"No," said Valk firmly. "Life is a precious thing. I do not have the right. She will be conscious in a moment."

Keenan stood looking down into the girl's face. It seemed quite childlike in its repose.

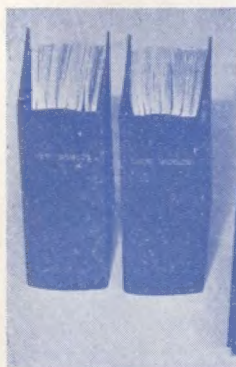
"Marie." He spoke softly, taking one of the limp hands in his.

Her mouth moved slightly and her head strained against the clamps which held it in position. Keenan spoke her name again.

There was a preliminary fluttering of the lids, then her eyes opened, looking straight up at him. "Pether . . ." Her voice was like the fluttering of a dry leaf in the wind. "Darling, I've been away . . ."

Keenan's heart leapt. Here was no mental retreat, but a sane recognition. Or was this just a fleeting moment of sanity before the gates of madness closed in on her soul forever?

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"Rest now, Marie," he said.

She smiled briefly, a sad ghost of a smile. "Yes . . . but don't leave me again . . . ever. Promise . . ."

Keenan swallowed back his emotion. "Just rest . . . You're going to be all right . . ."

Her eyes closed again, the smile still on her lips. Keenan released her hand and turned again to Valk who was standing quietly a few feet away.

"She seems normal—before she didn't recognise me. How long will this phase last?"

"The clearing of the traumatic condition took care of that," Valk said. "She is *sane* enough, poor child."

Keenan stepped forward uncertainly. "What are you saying? A moment ago you said there was no hope for her."

"I was speaking of the more important thing," replied Valk, calmly. "Her telepathic powers. They have been completely wrecked. She will never again be a sensitive. The treatment she has undergone has robbed her of the chance to become a member of the new colony—amongst them she would be a mental cripple. Surely that is tragedy enough?"

A new lightness of heart flowed through Keenan, and was muted as he recognised the selfishness of his attitude. And yet, was he so wrong to wish to have her by his side for the rest of his life?

"I misunderstood you," he said. "How long before she will be well enough to leave here?"

Valk produced a hypo gun, and moved over to the couch. "Eight, ten hours, perhaps. She must be allowed to build up her strength again. This will help."

"Thank you, Valk. I shall be back." Keenan walked out of the Sick Bay. There was a new firmness in his step and his mind was racing on ahead, making plans. Plans for a new life, a whole life for himself and Marie.

Fulby had said that the placing of the inhibitors was to continue. That would mean the permanent stationing on Earth of a group of Lessigians. Fulby would not refuse his request that he should be one of that group. Perhaps one day he and Marie would return to Lessigia—but wherever they were together, home would be in their hearts.